

Helps to a Life of Prayer.



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Helps to a life of prayer

H E L P S

TO

A LIFE OF PRAYER.

BY

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P R E F A C E .



MY own study of the subject of Prayer, some of the results of which are here gathered up, has brought to me a fuller experience of the nearness and love of God than I once had; and my earnest wish, in offering this volume to the public, is, that others may find the same blessed experience, or have it deepened within them if it be already theirs.

J. M. M.

OLD SOUTH PARSONAGE,
December, 1874.



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P R A Y E R .



CHAPTER I.

THE NATURE OF PRAYER.

THE word "prayer" denotes, in its most general sense, any form of petition; and it may be offered to equals or inferiors no less than to superiors; not only to our Maker, but also to our fellow-man. Yet the devout Christian is not pleased to hear the term used in merely human relations; it is a consecrated word, set apart from secular to sacred uses. We do, in form at least, admit a kind of sovereignty in those to whom we address our prayer. Ostensibly we bow down before them, and lift up our eyes reverently unto them, as those who hold our destiny in their hand.

Such deference as this towards any man, or assembly of men, seems to be inconsistent with the doctrine of human equality; it strikes the thoughtful mind as bordering on sacrilege, as coming very near to idolatrous worship, and it is tolerated only as a time-honored way of dealing with persons in authority, in which not half so much reverence is felt as professed.

Prayer, then, in its appropriate use, is always a religious exercise. It brings the creature face to face with the Creator. While man is speaking it is God who giveth him audience; the voice of the finite child commands the ear of the infinite Father.

But even in this its highest and most sacred use, the word prayer may have either a specific or a general meaning. In strictness of speech, we pray unto God only as we entreat him to bestow favors on ourselves or others; the exclamation of the Publican was strictly a prayer. It is said, however, that the Pharisee stood and prayed, though he only thanked God that he was able

Restricted,
in usage, to
religion.

Strictly a
petition.

to have a very good opinion of himself. Here, then, the word is used in its broader sense; and in this sense it is used throughout the

Scriptures, denoting any form of address from man to his Maker. Our Lord taught his disciples to pray; yet

the Lord's Prayer embraces much besides the asking of favors from God. It begins with an invocation; we first recognize the relation in which God stands to us, by calling upon him as our Father. We then express humility and reverence by representing him as in heaven, while we remember that we are on the earth. Next our souls pour themselves forth in adoration — "hallowed be thy name." From this we rise to a view of the absolute dominion

of God, exclaiming, with ardent desire, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven." Following

this is the petition — a prayer in the strict and proper sense of the word, included *within* the general address, which is also called a prayer. And even this specific prayer contains a confession of sin, and the claiming of a

More generally any address to God.

Example of the Lord's Prayer.

certain worthiness on the part of the suppliant, which he urges as a reason for his own forgiveness. After these various utterances, we still pray by submitting ourselves and all things to God, ascribing unto him the kingdom, and the power, and the glory.

From these examples it appears that any language through which we address ourselves to God—be that language expressive of penitence, adoration, vows, or desire—comes within the scriptural definition of prayer. Talking or communing with God is the general truth which the inspired writers have always in mind; and so solemn and overawing is God's presence, that while we are conscious of speaking to him our thoughts naturally take on reverent, lowly, and prayerful forms.

The Scriptures also reckon as prayer that spirit of worship which makes us love to draw nigh to God. When we are bidden to pray without ceasing, as in Eph. 6: 8, it cannot be the outward act of prayer which is enjoined, since the command would then be wholly out of

All communing with God is praying.

our ability to perform. If faithful to all other duties, we can spend but a small part of each day in external acts of devotion. It is not to

an outward exercise, but to an habit-

ual disposition; not to audible prayer,

but to a prayerful spirit, that the Bible

refers when it tells us to pray without ceasing. In this devoutness of the renewed soul we find the last and holiest meaning of the term prayer. It is to this inward flame, ever mounting up unto God, that the apostle points when he says, "praying always with all prayer and supplication in the spirit." By praying *in the spirit* he evidently means to say that we must be under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, in order that we may rightly offer up our requests to God. And since the blessed Comforter comes to us inwardly, not outwardly, this phrase, *praying in the spirit*, also teaches us that true prayer never consists in the external form, but in the desires and aspirations of the soul. Therefore it is no periodic utterances of articulate or audible prayers, but the hidden life of communion with God, which the Scriptures enjoin. St.

An habit-
ual state of
the soul.

Paul may properly exhort us to pray always, since by prayer he means a kind of divine friendship and intimacy, a walking and talking in spirit with our God. Such being the nature and essence of everything worthy to be called prayer, we can readily see how it becomes a constant and life-long duty, and why all men should give it their most earnest and sacred heed.

There is, then, such a thing as *secular* prayer, but more properly the word conveys a *religious* idea; also, as expressive of worship towards God, it may be either specific or general,—denoting *simply* requests made to him, or, more broadly, *any* utterance designed for his ear; and in this divine relation the word may denote either the *formal act* of prayer, or the unspoken *spirit* of devotion. Of these five different meanings which the word may have, the last seems most important; not only because it alone may be a constant and indwelling habit, but because it is the fountain and inner substance of the others. Prayerfulness is the

This inward habit most important.

root and the life of all forms of prayer. It may be called a divine society, for it makes God the daily companion of the praying spirit,—he comes and takes up his abode with it. It is an uninterrupted intercourse and communion of soul. Whoever prays after this manner dwells in God and God in him, so that it may be said of him, in the strong words of Chrysostom, that his entire life is an unbroken prayer.

Let me ask you, therefore, to attend a little further to this apostolic definition of prayer, that we may not be mistaken as to what it is or what it involves.

1. Prayerfulness, or praying in the spirit, presupposes, *first*, some degree of likeness to God in character. This inward life of prayer is fellowship with God, and there can be no real fellowship between those whose characters and tastes are wholly dissimilar. A thorough metaphysician can have but little intellectual sympathy with one who is given up to poetry. The man of retirement and thought is seldom congenial

What is
involved.

Must be
moral like-
ness to
God.

to the man of affairs. Their callings in life develop opposite tastes, different social wants. If the pastor of a church is consecrated to his divine studies, in the midst of a people whom God has called to the varied pursuits of this life, they will often find it a little hard to be entirely at ease and free in each other's company, however great their mutual love and esteem may be. Allowance must be made for the effect of different kinds of earthly discipline, or there can be no Christian brotherhood. Charity, oftentimes, is but another name for this social hospitality. Men are like musical instruments. If two violins have been tuned to a different key, it is in vain that we strive to play them in harmony; they will give forth only discords. In the world of matter there are attractions and repulsions; from which fact some ancient sages inferred that the particles of matter have active and intelligent souls, which prompt them to seek out and be united with homogeneous atoms, and to repel their opposites. Just so is it in things spiritual.

Opposites
cannot be
in fellow-
ship.

Antipa-
thies in
nature.

In morals and religion, more than anywhere else, sympathies and antipathies show themselves. Souls which have been differently tuned will but clash when we attempt to make them move in unison. What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? or what part hath he that believeth with him that is an infidel? is the argument in Corinthians. There can be no mutual confidence or intimacy between two persons, one of whom is governed by conscience and the other by selfishness.

Moral differences irreconcilable.

It is those of like character, and that, too, a holy and upright character, who become true friends, and are gradually drawn into the bonds of social endearment. Neither with the good nor among themselves can the evil be long at peace. Every unrenewed soul is itself the field of a perpetual war. But Christians would, without any divine command to that effect, be drawn together into permanent fellowship. The church rests upon a law of nature. The renewed soul obeys its own impulse, as well as the word of God, when it seeks member-

A natural law makes the church.

ship in the church. So far as the spirit of glory and of God rests on them, Christians have a strong propensity to this fellowship one with another, under the covenants. It is a witness that we have passed from death unto life, that we have this drawing of soul towards all Christians.

And now, if an immoral person can have no oneness of spirit with a good man, how much more true must it be that he can have no communion with God! Our God is perfect in holiness; he cannot look on sin, save with infinite abhorrence; he turns away, with immeasurable loathing, from every impure act or desire. We *cannot* pray in spirit unto such a God, while we have *no* spiritual likeness to him. What

Nothing
else so op-
posed to sin
as God.

fellowship hath light with darkness? what concord is there between Christ and Belial? what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? Our God shows great and tender love for us when he says, "Be ye holy." The argument is, "for I am holy." That is to say, communion with me is the crowning blessing of your life; but I

am holy; therefore you must be holy in order to that communion. Our Saviour expresses the same truth in the sixth beatitude: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." God is pure; therefore we must be pure, or no vision of his radiant person can ever be vouchsafed us. The character he bids us build up in ourselves is indispensable to any sweet intercourse with him. That soul whose true life is not a partaking of the life of God, may utter forms of prayer, but it cannot pray; its suppliant phrases, and the glowing rhapsodies with which it may charm human ears, do not enter into the ear of the Lord of Sabaoth. There is no child's cry in them, and hence they meet no answering throb in the Father's heart.

Only the
holy can
have union
with God.

But am I not like God? asks the natural, unrenewed man, who thinks that it is praying to say prayers. Yes, God made us in his image; and no amount of sinning can quite efface that image from our nature. But it is only a likeness in our nature, not in our character — an essential, not a moral

Likeness
of nature
not enough.

resemblance. It is involuntary ; something, that is, which we cannot help having ; it exists while we are unconscious of it ; nor can it be subjected to the dominion of our will. Plainly, then, this likeness to God in our nature is not that agreement with him which is presupposed in the offering of acceptable prayer. It is simply a basis, on which we are to rear up a holy character for ourselves ; and this holy character is what brings us into real and blessed intercourse with God. There may be a kind of intellectual coming to him, and our natural feelings may gush forth after him, while there is no true holiness of soul ; it does not constitute that free consent by which the pure spirit rests in God. There is no blending of the human will with the divine, no trustfulness, no sweet self-surrender, no giving up to the father by the child. Many persons are awed by the attributes of God ; they love to be bathed in the ocean of his greatness, and to feel his majesty creeping like a charmed shadow upon them. The glory of his creation, and the grandeur of his government, make them

A godly
character
essential.

tremble and adore ; and they speak sublimely of his goings forth to work wonders in heaven above and the earth beneath. So strong is this response in our nature to the divine glories, that we may mistake it for genuine adoration of God.

Intellectual excitement is not the spirit of prayer.

The poet often thinks that his mental uplifting and wondering are a real communion with God. He writes lofty hymns of praise, which go down through the ages as the outflowings of a Christian spirit ; yet in it all there may be no loving consent and agreement of his will with the will of the Most High. He can turn away from his raptures about God, to be affected in the same manner by his contemplations amid the beauties and sublimities of the material world. It is not the holiness of God that charms him, and draws him up into an ecstasy ; he loves that great Being only as he loves the cataract, the Alpine scene, the spangled heavens, or the ocean storm. He takes the poet's pleasure in what is grand, or radiant, or majestic, or awful, in God and his ways ; but he does not

A prayerful spirit different from poetical feeling.

feel the lowly joy of the Christian, who is drawn to God most of all by his holy and compassionate character. It is this moral likeness to God, built up by ourselves under the movings of the Holy Ghost upon that natural likeness in which man was created, that renders us in the truest sense like our God. Nothing else, however pleasing or admirable it may be, can fit us for communion with him; and hence it is involved in all the forms of true prayer, as it is the substance and soul of a prayerful spirit. We can pour out our souls to God in prayer, and lean upon his goodness with a constant and joyous trust, only as we like him,—breathing his spirit of holiness, and filling all our purposes and acts with his own perfect love.

2. A second element, which enters into the very idea and essence of a prayerful spirit, is the clear apprehension of God as present and near to the praying soul. God is always with us, but we are apt to forget this solemn truth. He listens to our idle words, he sees our conduct, he knows

None but
the godly
find God.

God is real
to the soul
while it
prays.

our thoughts. But this nearness and oversight are not always kept in mind by us. We go on our several ways as if no divine eye were looking. We hide iniquity in our hearts, seeming not to remember that even they are naked and open to Him with whom we have to do. This delusion we must overcome before we can truly pray. Our souls can commune with God only as their apprehension of him as a God at hand, and not afar off, is clear. That is not a prayer to God which we offer with no faith that it enters into his ear. How absurd it would be in us to call out for help to a person on the other side of the globe! But we ask God for help every day.

Cannot address the distant or unreal. We speak to him aloud and in whispers, and we lift up our hearts to him silently for his blessing; nor do we regard this speaking to him as at all absurd. Do we not, therefore, in form at least, assent to the truth that God is with us, giving us audience when we come before him in prayer? And what we take for granted in form, is what there must indeed be in our souls, or our utterance is not praying. "Give ear,

O Shepherd of Israel," say we, as we stand in that august presence. But if our hearts feel not what our lips speak, it is only a solemn sound on a thoughtless tongue. "We cannot escape from thy presence, nor go from thy Spirit," is the uplifted voice of the congrega-

What our prayers become if we lack the vision of God.

tion; but do we, in our public worship, apprehend the truth thus confessed? If not, there is no seeing of God who stands above us and

bends down to our cry; and hence there can be no fellowship with him, no mingling of our spirit with his, nothing which answers to the essential idea of prayer. He that cometh to God must believe that God is, and that he rewards those who diligently seek him. How many times we utter the words of prayer when there is no such object of faith before us! We go into our closet and shut the door upon the world, but God is not with us in our room. We try to recall our mercies and our sins, but they appear before us only in a confused and partial manner. Neither gratitude nor penitence comes at our bidding. If

we take the attitude of petition, still the fountains of feeling are not unloosed. It is a heartless service, an irksome duty. Christ cometh not in through the door to feed and refresh our souls. On the contrary, if we hear the voice of Christ as he stands without and knocks, and admit him to actual communion with our spirit, how we are lifted up, calmed and refreshed by the hour of prayer! Thus only do we really *begin* to pray, and to feel in ourselves the water which Christ gives springing up into everlasting life. It is idle in us to spread forth our hands in prayer while we have no sense of a present Father. We may look towards heaven; but "I will not hear you," saith the Lord; "yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear." There may be reverence of manner, subdued tones of voice, much appropriate and touching expression. Human feelings may rise up together, and all hearts be borne away on one wave of sympathy; but there is no coming of the soul into God's embrace, where alone the answer of peace can be received. This

Such
prayers
mock the
soul.

flow of the natural feelings subsides, and the worshipper grows still and calm in spirit, as

The calm
joy of
prayer. he really prays. How can our souls be agitated while they are conscious of leaning on Him who hushes the storm?

“I have set the Lord on my right hand; therefore will I never be moved,” said the Psalmist. This quietness of the praying heart is not stoicism; it is the peace of God. Like Jacob of old, we may be driven away from our home, knowing that an enemy seeks our life. We may lie down as he did — wanderers, sheltered only by the firmanent, making a stone our pillow, the cold earth a bed to us in our weariness; but when we remember in whose hand we are,

It makes
the desert
a Bethel. and turn over in our mind the truth of his presence, till he stands out to our faith in the glory and blessedness of his person, the bended sky becomes to us the canopy of the great white throne, and its hosts of stars the crowns which are cast at Christ’s feet. Joining in the worship of the hundred and forty-four thousand, we breathe our spirit forth with them in prayer to Him

that sitteth on the throne. The answers of God, coming down to us while our requests rise to him, are like the angels on the ancient ladder ascending and descending; communion with the Father of our spirits makes the desert a Bethel, and the place of danger and gloom is the gate of heaven. We may, in public or among our friends, offer prayers when we have no clear recognition of a present and listening God. We may speak out our wants into vacancy, thinking only of the rhetorical beauty of our sentences, or the logical arrangement of our thoughts, or whether those who join with us are pleased with what we say; but our souls will sink down unrefreshed after the exercise: on the other hand, if we come in faith to Him who hears prayer,—if we forget all else in the eagerness of our souls to be poured out into his open heart,—it matters not how confused, or how brief, or how stammering our utterance may be; it will rise with acceptance into the ear of the Lord of hosts, and we shall receive of his own joy till our joy is full. It was in vain

A faulty
utterance
no clog to
the yearn-
ing heart.

that the disciples continued toiling and rowing while they forgot Him who lay asleep in the hinder part of the ship. But when they remembered that he was with them, and called out for help to him with a strong and yearning cry, the Lord of nature arose and rebuked the wind, the majesty of his word hushing the storm and subduing the waves to an unwonted calm.

3. One other element essential to the idea of true prayer is a feeling of dependence on God.

A feeling of dependence essential to prayer. It is not enough that our character should be like his, and that we should know him as present and listening while we pray; we must also feel that he is immeasurably greater than we, and that the sources of our being are in him. Every one grants that such a feeling is involved in all honest prayer. We never heartily ask another to bestow on us what we believe that our own efforts must secure. Herein is the lack which spoils very many of our prayers; we deny in our heart what we say with our tongue. There is a form, but while offering it we distrust its power. The confession of de-

pendence flows on while inwardly there is no real trust. Our reliance is upon second causes, rather than the great First Cause. These second

God often
hidden by
second
causes.

causes are God's instruments; through them he works to bless us. They are visible and tangible, and we are in the midst of them every day; while he

himself is impalpable, unseen save by the eye of faith. The spring comes to us fresh and smiling, and we see the working of natural law in the renewing of the earth's face; but we do not hear the divine voice which recalls the sun from his winter journey. We feel the solar rays, but not Him who gives them their heat — who breathes his own energy into them that they may melt the cheerless covering of nature. Our God, whom we hear not, and whose glory it is to conceal a thing, takes hold of these created agents, and through them unlooses, with his own hand, the ice-bound waters;

Natural
forces nothing
without
God.

he makes soft the earth with showers, and causes the grass to grow on the mountains, and the valleys to be covered over with corn. So is it in all the

processes of nature ; so is it in the small events which make up the providential allotments of each hour. But we are apt to be absorbed in what appears outwardly, to the exclusion of Him who works within all objects, processes, or events. That omnipotent hand which has hold of the whole system of natural appliances is hidden from our sight ; and we stand in the midst of the passive vehicles of God's love, saying one to another, "These be thy gods, O Israel." Thus it is that many persons come to worship the creature more than the Creator. The universal frame of nature is their God. They worship that which were a dead and motionless structure but for Him who is wonderful in working ; for as the body without the spirit is dead, so nature without God is lifeless and unmeaning. This naturalism, of which some about us are making their boast, puts a great gulf between man and God ; between the heavens and Him whose glory the heavens declare. It knows nothing of a supreme Father ; does not deign even to ask whether there

Nature-
worship a
poor coun-
terfeit.

be any God; locates human wisdom in the study of nature, and all happiness in dependence on nature's laws. The friends of this philosophy, as in simple consistency they must, deny that there is any power in prayer. They have reared up their system to an imposing height, and fitly framed it together in all its parts; but they confess that they know not on what it stands. There is no recognition of the hand which holds the wondrous fabric of nature in its grasp.

Now, if we fall under the power of this earthly-mindedness, and come to regard all our blessings as the fruit of our own sagacious use of natural forces,—if our sweet slumber, and the enlivening air, our daily bread, our friendships, the riches of this life, and our spiritual favors,—seem to us not to come from God, but from agents and influences which we may control, we cannot offer up our prayers and thanksgivings to God for all these mercies. We lack that spirit of a child which is great in the kingdom of heaven. The humble Christian does not

Must be
conscious
of wants
which God
only can
supply.

despise the means appointed of God for securing blessings to men ; but he does look beyond these means always, not suffering them to obscure his view of the supreme and constant love of his heavenly Father. Nothing can separate between us and him so long as we have in us the essence and substance of a praying spirit. Our soul stands related to God as a beam of light to the sun. Though it warm the earth by its low-descending touch, yet it is ever mounting up into its great fountain. The human and divine meet and mingle. They throb with a single life — the life of holiness and love, whose centre is God. Their intercourse is unobstructed ; and while the spirit of the Father is gushing downward in heavenly benedictions, the spirit of the child is ever rising upward into his bosom in trustful and adoring prayer.

Christian, are you ever dissatisfied with your prayers ? O, let not that regret be for the reason that your prayers have been imperfect in form ; for the reason that you have failed to edify a human auditory, or have used broken words or sentences which can lay no claim to

elegance, comprehensiveness of thought, or a happy interweaving of incidents and inspired texts. Let it be the occasion of your sorrow, rather, if you have lacked the essential elements of a prayerful spirit; if you have not any moral likeness to Him who is holy, and benevolent, and merciful; if you fail to apprehend God as

What we should most regret in our prayers.

near and listening to you while you pray; if you find it hard to look through all created causes to Him who is the Hope and the Helper of the children of

men. If you are destitute of this inward spirit of prayer, your most graceful form of devotion is but as the marble statue of an angel, cold and motionless; but if your soul is in fellowship with God after the manner I have

Having the spirit will make the form.

here sought to impress, even the rudest form of speech shall be a living seraph, bearing you away upward from the care and turmoil of this world, to be rested and refreshed in the arms of that love which is from everlasting to everlasting.

CHAPTER II.

FORMS OF PRAYER.

WE love to give expression to our strong feelings and thoughts. Whatever may^{be} the mood or sentiment swelling within our mind, we seek to utter it in words which shall return it to us audibly through the ear, or we strive to embody it in artistic forms and colors, which give it back through the ministry of the eye. This embodying of our inward states of soul makes them real and impressive to us. They are thereby made to stand out vividly to our memory and in our consciousness. Our emotions are greatly increased, both in fullness and power, by these outward embodiments; they speak back to the soul with a marvellous sympathy; they re-echo to it its deepest and most sacred self-communings. Raffaele labored to express his dream

of beauty; his nature demanded it of him; he could not help being the great artist that he was.

Mental states seek a body. Love of scientific truth was a passion in Galileo, and it was impossible for him not to utter that passion; though the terrors of the Inquisition hung over him, they failed to keep him silent. It is a common remark that, while many men have been able to write no book, few men have been able to write only one book. The more one publishes his thoughts, the stronger is the impulse to keep on publishing them. The expression given to a single thought reacts on the mind to awaken other thoughts. The longer a preacher of the gospel continues to preach, the harder is it for him to cease from preaching. The more Luther meditated, the more urgent were his thoughts to be spoken; and therefore he could not keep still before the Imperial Diet, though he took his life in his hand. Paul longed to preach Christ: it was his one burning and soul-filling desire; and therefore it was not possible for him to be silent. "Necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is me if I preach not the gospel," he exclaims.

When Jesus rode in triumph into Jerusalem, the multitude, being full of a grateful joy, praised God, saying, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." It was in vain that the Pharisees rebuked the people. The very stones would have cried out had man kept silent in such an hour. Trying to stay that gush of joy was like commanding a river to flow upward to its source. The authors of the Psalms were men of prayer; David especially lived a life of communion with God, and hence almost all his

Origin of forms of prayer. writings are prayers—external forms and embodiments of this inward habit.

The spirit of prayer in him did not need to be *goaded* to an expression of itself; it flowed out spontaneously and irresistibly. If he strove to be silent he was burdened with longing; his bones wasted away under the restraint thus laid on him.

Perhaps no brighter instance of the impulse of a prayerful spirit to seek expression can be found than is brought to our notice in the story of Daniel. By the contrivance of certain envious courtiers a decree

The story of Daniel.

had been issued, having special reference to this godly captive, ordering that prayer should be made to no being but Darius in his kingdom. Should any one be detected breaking this decree, he was to be thrown to the lions — the most frightful and ignominious of punishments. Daniel might have prayed secretly and inaudibly without being found out; but this was not his custom, nor did it agree with his convictions of duty. He could show a nobler trust in God, and more fully unburden his heart by speaking audibly; nor might he hope that his prayer would enter into the divine ear if he allowed himself to be controlled by any fear of man. Therefore, although he knew that the writing was signed, — his death-warrant if he persisted in praying, — he went into his house, boldly opened the windows, kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed and gave thanks to God as aforetime.

From the case of Daniel, then, and from the other examples and illustrations just given, we infer that forms of prayer are a necessity to the praying soul. That soul must speak forth its

inward state — an inward state which consists in likeness of character to God, a clear apprehension of the presence of God, and a sense of loving dependence on God.* The *nature* of a prayerful spirit, as thus briefly defined, indicates in what ways and forms it may most properly indulge the impulse which it feels to seek outward expression. Bearing in mind the universal law of speech, that it should correspond to the feeling or thought which it embodies, we are prepared to consider some of the methods by which the praying soul may give utterance to its longings.

1. The first and most natural way in which a prayerful spirit utters itself, especially if its burden be very great and urgent, is by ejaculatory prayer. This form of prayer has some peculiar advantages; it may be used in the midst of peril and confusion. It is a momentary act. In such utterances the hard-pressed soul gathers itself into a short, sharp cry, and so is hurled, as by an in-

How to
determine
the proper
forms of
prayer.

Ejacula-
tory
prayer.

* See previous chapter.

stantaneous impulse, into the arms of its God. This form of prayer, though so befitting the sudden exigencies of our lives, is susceptible of many perversions and of very great abuse. Those who practise it too freely may fall into the habit of irreverent and profane exclamations before they are aware. These pious ejaculations are suited only to a prayerful spirit; and if uttered when no heavy burden is crushing the soul down, they are too intense to be true. Yet how common are these exclamations, even among ungodly men! It is a fact worthy of our most serious study that what we call profane language grows out of the same want in human nature as the habit of prayer; the blasphemies of Shimei and the prayers of David have but one natural root. There is a feeling of dependence on God planted in all human hearts; and when that feeling is suddenly aroused in any one, his first impulse is to call on the name of God. With the irreligious person as with the religious, this calling upon God may grow to be a habit; and so, whatever the passion which moves him,— though a storm of anger, as it is most

Abuse of
this form.

likely to be,—he utters it in words sacred to prayer. Hence the profaneness, the sacrilege which shocks our souls. He acts under the natural impulse of a wicked heart; there are in him none of the elements of character and feeling which all true prayer involves. He makes the channel of divine communion a vehicle for his earthly passion; it is as though the Sabbath were changed to a holiday, or the temple of God were used for a playhouse. His language might be prayer if it came from a heart right with God; but falling as it does from sinful lips, the stain of blasphemy is upon it. Do not fail to mark the fact here brought out, dear reader, if you are ever tempted to the careless use of words and phrases which are sacred. Your evil habit proves to you that you have an instinctive feeling of dependence on God. It is also your noblest feeling, since by it you come into communion with God: what shame and remorse therefore should fill you if you have made this high capacity do the work of your worst and lowest impulses!

Debases
what is best
in man.

No one should be so bold as to use this form of prayer who is not sure that he has the love of God in his heart; nor he even, save when, with a spirit which can say, "Thy will be done," he leaps upward, out of the reach of some pursuing terror, to embrace the knees of the Eternal King who alone can deliver him. Whoever hurls forth these emotional phrases without any sense of the divine presence, and of his own utter dependence on God, does not pray; he simply uses vain repetitions, such as our Sa-
 viour warns us against. Prayerful ejac-
 ulations are fit only for the soul which
 some mighty emotion has heaved up
 and cast at the very footstool of God.

When
 ejaculatory
 prayers are
 proper.

It is they that are hunted for their lives who may venture to cry out with David, "*Awake* for me, O Lord." There was no blasphemy in the tongue of the publican; for he smote on his breast in guilty grief, and out of a heart torn by remorse, cried, "God be merciful." "My God, art thou dead?" was the wild cry of Luther's heart once, as he lost the sense of God's presence in the midst of his enemies. Such

expressions as these are not the vehicles to which the praying soul resorts in its calm and unimpassioned hours; it chooses gentler wings on which its quiet thoughts may soar. But when these intense words burst like red-hot balls out of hearts rent by the tumult of anguish and despair, then we may believe that they are true to the inner yearnings of God's struggling child, and that they are not more swift to reach his throne than are his fatherly compassions to fly downward for our relief.

2. But these sudden bursts of emotion do not realize the idea of communion with God. They are only momentary infoldings of God's love. They do not satisfy the praying soul, which longs for quiet retreats, where it may nestle in the everlasting arms. Hence the habit of Secret prayer. secret prayer. A truly devotional frame will take this form as naturally as a tree sends out its roots by the river. Secret prayer has ever been a delight to holy men. Every day has brought them to its blessed observance, and they have come from it with radiant faces. It is true that many professing

Christians have no closet, but such are not the victorious and rejoicing children of God. It is the unquickened, earth-bound soul to which this frequent retirement is a drudgery and form. He goes into the secret place having no lively fellowship with Christ. He does not walk and talk with God, and therefore fails to find him in the cool of the day. There is no breathing upward of his spirit through the reverent words which he utters into the dear heart of a present and loving Father. The prayer is empty and worthless because it is not born of a praying spirit. Those affections which should be growing up around Christ and taking hold of God, are earth-clinging and prone. No wonder that such an one comes from his closet unrefreshed. He lacks a prayerful spirit — the first prerequisite to all living forms of prayer. Those who refuse to pray save as it suits their feelings, and who therefore have no stated times for prayer, should remember that it is possible for them to feel at all times like praying. This lack of feeling or impulse never comes in to fret the soaring and prevailing soul. He is

Why neglected by many.

always ready for his hours of converse with God, and meets them with a deepening thirst for the water of life. They are channels opening upward, through which the longings of his heart flow into the love of God. So far are they from putting the least check on his freedom that they alone are able to make him free indeed. His soul would be cramped and sad but for this opportunity to open itself to its incoming God. Whoever has true spiritual life dwelling in him and filling him is not sorrowful, but more pleased the oftener he may give that life an outflow, or feel it enlarged by the shedding abroad in him of the divine spirit. Like the thirsty traveller, he does not murmur because drinking fountains occur at regular intervals along the road. He is glad to know beforehand at just what places he may rest and be refreshed. Regularity is not wearisome, but welcome, in the doing of what we love to do. The spirit of prayer is the great need. Having that, the more the occasions for uttering it, the greater our joy. It is in his closet, alone with God, that the Chris-

How to
make our
closets a
delight.

tian burnishes his armor. His spirit is there bathed and warmed in the sunlight of its Father's love. He pours forth his wants without any reserve. None of them are too trivial for Him without whom not a sparrow falleth on the ground. His whole soul is laid open to God, and he prays and makes confession with a fullness unsuited to any place less secluded. It was this basking in the radiance of God that made the faces of the prophets shine. Elijah came out of the secret place of the Most High to work wonders in the sight of Israel. David remembered God in the night watches, and prevented the morning with his supplications. The witnesses to the power of secret prayer to lift up and inspire men cannot be counted for number. It is the Christian's vital breath. Only as he prays does he live the life which Christ brought to our world.

The blessed Son of God himself even was dependent on his private devotions. If the people thronged him through the day, so that he could not be alone, he would go away upon the

Freedom of
the closet.

Testimo-
nies to its
precious-
ness.

mountains in the night time, and there have his hours of intercourse with God. Our souls renew their youth in this calm and still fellowship. They are made to leap with a more intense life by the flowing into them of the life of God till their very substance throbs and leaps with a joy which they cannot tell.

3. Another form in which the spirit of prayer tends to utter itself is public and social prayer.

Public and social prayer. A new element here comes into the exercise. It is not for him who prays, alone, but for those also whom he asks to pray with him. At first thought it seems almost presumptuous to attempt to give voice to the wants of a large company of worshippers. But the true Christian often finds more comfort in the prayers of another than in his own. This fact should encourage us, though we may be able to offer only what seem to us very imperfect public prayers. The young disciple who sits down after this exercise almost mortified by the thought that no one has been edified, is often mistaken. He does not know how the maturest and most in-

A difficulty to be overcome.

telligent Christians love his simple and child-like prayers. We should take care, however, in overcoming this hinderance to public prayer, not to fall into its peculiar temptation. That temptation is to forget the God in whose presence we stand, and make our prayer solely for human ears. Thus our utterance ceases to be prayer, and is changed into a mere harangue, whose solemn tone is an offence to God. He who leads in the service of public prayer should bear in mind that many hearts are sending up

Ambitious prayers. requests to God through his utterance. He should use that plain and simple language which is becoming in them. They all speak to God in his words, and it is the prayer of the humble that God does not despise. We honor the greatness of God by speaking to him as little children, since our sublimest speech can never agree with his infinite majesty. I am disposed to favor the wise use of written or printed forms in public prayer. Though the pulpit should use them only sparingly, as may tend most to edification in any case, I should be glad to hear them used often in the social

meeting, especially by those who distrust their own powers. The young Christian often finds it a sore trial to rise up before us and pray. Let him, therefore, procure a volume of printed prayers. In these we can join with him till

he gets used to the sound of his own voice; till he acquires confidence and self-possession, and is so at home in the service as to be able to trust his unaided efforts. If our young brethren, whom we love all the more for being easily abashed, would follow out this suggestion, I am persuaded that it would give us a much larger number of praying men in the church than we now have. Familiarity with the Scriptures is a great help in public to those who would clothe their prayers in reverent and appealing forms. I say "familiarity with the Scriptures," for this Bible imagery should come to the praying soul

The form
need not be
extemporaneous
always.

unsought. We cease to pray as we struggle for it, and fall into the intellectual effort of trying to remember what we have half forgotten. It is better that we should not quote God's words to him when we

Use of biblical
language.

go before him in prayer, than that our souls should fail to come sweetly and lovingly into his embrace. An uttered form of words to which we apply the term "eloquent" can hardly be a true prayer. Its fault is in calling attention to itself, and to the person who makes it. The fact that there is a mercy-seat, before which we have bowed together, is the one grand impression which a public prayer should leave. As the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration lifted up their eyes and saw no man save Jesus only, so should it be with us after the devotions of the house of God; we should meet our divine

God only to
be exalted
in public
prayer.

Father in them, and forget both ourselves and him who leads in our prayers. It is a wrong to us, and a sin against God, when the minister or other person tries, under the pretence of praying for us, to see how much he can work upon our feelings, or how much admiration he may beget in us for himself. The worst abuse of public prayer is that which makes it a means of giving rebuke or advice to a fellow-man. Yet some of the most eminent and godly men

have been guilty of this sin, and owe their fame largely to the skill with which they have lashed other men in their prayers. Many a prayer,

so called, has been purely a homily, or a cloak of malice and cowardice. It has served as the covering of an

invidious thrust; things were hinted which the speaker dared not say in honest fashion; he gave advice, he criticised, he found fault, he flattered or condemned, in the name

of prayer to God. I am at loss whether most to despise the meanness or abhor the impiety of this abuse; it is sacrilege towards God and pusillanimity towards our fellow-men. The wor-

shipper in the public or social meeting has a

right to demand that whoever speaks for him before God should speak as

it becomes his own heart to pray;

that his words come forth from a loving and lowly heart, and that they be addressed to Him who pities our frailty and our sin. This, and nothing else, though it be neither elegant nor flowing in language, is true public prayer.

Thus standing and speaking, no one need fear

Our prayers should not preach.

What each worshipper may claim.

about the form of his petitions. He who cannot join with such a leader, however faulty his utterance, shows that he has not the spirit of prayer in him. It is a blessed relief and refreshment to the devout soul to turn from the rolling diction of the self-conscious pedant and be borne upward on the outpourings of unlettered faith. Better were it for all Christians that they should never learn to reason like the sage than that they should forget to pray like the child.

4. There is one other form of prayer most grateful to the human heart, arising out of that mysterious sympathy which there is between our feelings and certain musical sounds.

Music may
be a form of
prayer.

Any sweet note, if it be prolonged, will cause some chord within us to vibrate responsively; and when several such melodies are combined into a harmony, their subtile power is still more subduing. Not all musical sounds are devotional. Some of them excite ludicrous rather than reverent emotions. They all have their examples in nature. The babbling of the brook and noisy chirping of the birds dispose one to cheerfulness and gayety;

it is their tendency to drive away from us any solemn thought. All complicated, curious sounds affect us in like manner. They do not leave the mind to its own musings, but draw off its attention to themselves. A praying spirit is most pleased with the simple, low, and deep-toned voices of nature.

Power of
different
sounds in
nature.

The soft moaning of the mountain pine, the whispering of the leafy elms, the solemn voice which comes in from the sea, agree with it, and lend it wings. Philosophy cannot tell how it is that one class of sounds fills us with laughter, while another class makes us sober even to tears. It is a mystery. We know only the fact, and from it we may learn valuable lessons. The power of different kinds of music to awaken diverse feelings teaches us what to do if we would stir any given feeling in our hearts. A skilful choir of singers can sway an audience to any mood. It is in their power, by a few well-aimed measures, to deepen, change, destroy, or utterly reverse a present emotion. This susceptibility of men to music is what makes it a power, either for good

A power
for good or
evil.

or evil, in public worship. Especially may it help in giving utterance to the spirit of prayer. We know that our thoughts become clearer to us as we write them out, yet more impressive if that writing be given back to us by a human voice, more impressive still if the writing thus spoken be in the poetic form; but the deep thoughts of our hearts are never fully uttered, nor do they reach the climax of their power, till they are taken up on the wings of holy song. Every assembly of worshippers proves this. From the earliest ages of the world music has found its noblest home in God's temples.

Yet all music is not sacred. The ser-
 vice of song in the Lord's courts, like
 that of speaking and teaching, has its
 limits. The preacher cannot treat all subjects. Many thoughts occur to him which he values very highly; but if true to his office, he will leave them out of his sermons. They would not deepen those religious convictions which it is his business to make; therefore they do not belong to the sphere of the pulpit, but to the secular assembly, the platform, the hall of

Secular
 and sacred
 music.

common debate. In this respect the preacher has occasion to die daily, as he ought to, for he is sent to preach Christ, not his own wisdom. His displays of smartness and startling originality, being out of place in God's house, must occur elsewhere. But preaching is no more limited than sacred music. That word "sacred" should stand out in large letters, as applied to all the services of the sanctuary. Music is a language. It may be the language of mirth. Sometimes it expresses nothing but the ingenuity of the musician. Often it embodies only natural emotions. But in the sanctuary it is sacred; it is set apart from all other uses to the purposes of religious worship; there, before God, it should ever be the language of devotion, the vehicle of divine communion, the voice of prayer. Bear in mind that I use the word "prayer" in its broadest sense, to denote any form of utterance through which the soul addresses itself to God. It includes praise, adoration, confession, or anything else entering into this essential idea.

Respon-
sibility of
church
choirs.

Now, what I insist upon in regard to sacred

music is, that the praying soul shall find in it a voice suited to become the voice of prayer. The limits of sacred music have not been guarded more than those of sacred eloquence. There are hymns in some of our collections which ought never to be read in the temple of prayer. As of hymns so also of tunes. We cannot so sing all of them as to be thereby drawn upward from ourselves and the world into God's embrace; they are not a proper vehicle for either our prayers or our praises.

Other tunes, very faulty it may be, if judged solely by artistic standards, being full of a devotional spirit, are sung on from age to age, growing dearer and dearer to the heart of the church, despite all the criticisms of connoisseurs. No one should be regarded who complains that his taste as an artist is not met in the songs of the sanctuary. Those songs are prayers. It is enough if they touch the springs of faith, and if our souls may rise upon them to the down-coming love of our God. Art may do its utmost, but this element should not be left out or obscured.

The voice
of a devout
spirit.

How wonderful this sensitiveness of the soul to music! Its holiest emotions, its repentances, its adoration, its prayers, its trust, its praises may rise up to God through inarticulate harmonies. We have it in our power to be always furnished with this voice for the inner wants of the spirit. The music of the ocean is not always low and solemn; the storm lashes it to fury, and its voice is lifted up wrathfully on high. The winds do not always whisper gently among the trees, but often rush madly forth from their prison, and fill the sky with angry screams. But we can subject this spirit and breath of nature to our control. We can shut up the soul of harmony in our musical instruments, and in the powers of the human voice, and attune it to the deep and tender feelings with which we should come before God. Thus it is when articulate words fail us that we shall not lack the means of pouring out our hearts in prayer. The longing of the human soul for God, being touched by the subtile wand of harmony, may rise to our refuge and our rest.

Art may
control na-
ture.

It is sweet to talk with God in silent prayer; a relief to cry out to him for help in sudden peril; blessed to go away and find him alone in our closet when we have shut the door, strengthening to stand up and speak forth the yearnings of many hearts in audible tones. But when a perfect organ stirs the sleeping echoes of some ancient tune set to words which Christians of remote ages chanted along its royal notes, and an according choir swells and articulates the full tide of sound, while the voices of a vast congregation, rising up like mighty waters, lift the soul heavenward, then it is inspiring and enrapturing to pray. The good of many generations stand about us and join their voice to ours. Every Christian heart is melted, and every individual will wafted forth upon the gush of holy desire. Nor do the strains seem to die as they fade away upward one after another, but are still audible to our listening faith, blending in the song which goeth up forever before the throne.

The ideal
form of
public
prayer.

CHAPTER III.

THE OBJECTS OF PRAYER.

THOSE of us who are trying to live a life of prayer are often thrown into doubt, as St. Paul intimates that he sometimes was, concerning the specific objects for which it is proper that we should pray. This doubt is so great at times as to be a hinderance to prayer. We fear to go before God and give our longings a free voice, lest we should ask for what God cannot wisely give. He knows, better than ourselves, what we need, and what any others, for whom we are burdened, may need. It seems to us like doubting the omniscience of God and his infinite love, to be particular and definite in our requests. Do we not sometimes come from the mercy-seat fearing that we have prayed for objects which might

Doubtful-
ness of
mind.

harm us, or be contrary to the counsels of eternal wisdom, if bestowed? Shall we keep on crying to God for the things which, we are half persuaded, ought to be withheld? Here is a constantly recurring perplexity in the life of prayer. "We know not what to pray for as we ought;" and we should be tempted to cease praying, in any specific way, were we not assured that "the Spirit maketh intercession for us."

The trial of many Christians is *not* that they have no communion with God: their intercourse with him is such that they are all the time in a calm and heavenly frame; *not* that they are unconscious of inner wants which his fullness alone can supply; *not* that they are averse to the practice of private, social, or public prayer: it is their trial that, in their manifold relations to God and one another, and amid the complex interests of life, they know not what blessings would be according to God's will, and in the end for their own best good. The befitting forms of prayer we learn from the occasions on which we

A frequent trial.

make them. A sudden impulse of fear or hope, a shock of grief or joy, is the occasion for ejaculatory prayer. The daily wants of the Christian call him into the secret place where he is alone with God. Public prayer is the natural result of our fellowship as churches, and of our working together under Christ for the good of the world.

But though full of a praying spirit, and trying to pray always as the occasion requires, the voice of prayer yet falters on the lips of many Christians, for the reason given by St. Paul: "We know not what we should pray for." The form is well enough, but are the particular requests such as we ought to make? We doubt our ability to judge what would be best in the exigency; and this doubt deepens till we pray but hesitatingly, and without assurance, or resolve to cease praying altogether. The grand remedy, to which we should ever hasten when this perplexity is upon us, is the truth that the blessed Comforter prays for us. He is in the groanings which we cannot utter. He breathes our sense of want into

The grand
relief.

the heart of the Father. We need not hesitate, but may speak freely whatever longings crowd to our lips; for he prays through our prayers, graciously dropping out of them whatever is faulty, and presenting, in his golden censer, only so much as accords with the good will of God concerning us.

The assurance that the Spirit helpeth our infirmities is, then, the blessed argument with which we may ever quiet our misgiving hearts. Still, we should be glad to lessen those in-

firmities, or be rid of them, as much as possible. It is proper in us to

The wish to
be rid of
doubt.

desire that we may be perfect in our

supplications. We would know what we ought to pray for, as well as that the Spirit helps us when we pray for what we ought not. How can we obtain this knowledge? Are there any metes and bounds by which we may keep our steps? Have any marks or tests been given us by which we may know what things we ought to pray for? How can we keep ourselves from asking of God what he cannot wisely grant?

I venture a few remarks on these questions, not in the hope of answering them, but of relieving the Christian hearts which so often are burdened with them. The trial of knowing but in part what to pray for, must be ours till we know as we are known. Yet will it minister freedom to us in praying, to know as much as we can of the proper objects and bounds of this holy exercise.

May gratify
this wish in
part.

1. We are warranted in praying, I think, for anything which God has declared that he will bring to pass. I know that in saying this I meet what is perhaps the most common objection to all our prayers. "Why," it is urged, "should we pray for that which is sure to take place in virtue of the declared will of God?" For me it is a sufficient answer to this, that God uses our prayers among the means by which he is pleased to fulfil his counsels. Such indeed is the scriptural reply. In speaking of the return of his ancient people from captivity, God says, "I the Lord have spoken it and will do it, yet will I be inquired

Proper to
pray for
what God
has prom-
ised.

A common
objection.

of by the house of Israel to do it for them." Daniel, we find, did not remit prayer, but prayed more earnestly for the escape of the Jews from Babylon, when he knew the fact and the exact time of their release. As soon as he knew that God had willed the rebuilding of Jerusalem, he set his face unto the Lord God with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes; and he prayed, saying, "I beseech thee, let thine anger be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate." This is but one of a great many examples, partly in the Old Testament and partly in the New, where inspired men cried earnestly to God for blessings which they knew he would bestow.

If any turn from Scripture to our weak human reason, and say that we need not be careful to pray, since God decrees the prayers as well as the objects for which they are made, then he has left the particular question of prayer, and opened the whole subject of man's agency as related to God's sovereign control.

The scrip-
tural an-
swer.

He takes the ground that man is altogether irresponsible for the working out of the divine plans. All events are purposed of God,—

Agreement
of reason
with Scrip-
ture.

those for which we labor, no less than those for which we pray. What we shall eat, and drink, and wherewithal we shall be clothed; every success or failure in life; the angry and the kind words which we speak; the blows and the charities dealt out to our fellow-men; the overthrow of kingdoms and the falling of the hunted sparrow, are events which enter into the eternal counsels: yet we know that none of these things come to pass without the free action of the human will. If he is beside himself who refuses to plant since God has said that the harvest shall not fail, then is he beside himself who says that prayer is useless since

The objec-
tion specu-
lative.

the things for which we pray are a part of God's plan. This objection, we are to notice, is not practical, but purely theoretical. It does not grow out of our common sense, or way of dealing with affairs of present moment to us, but out of

our metaphysics; it is a child of the speculative faculty in us. That all events are from eternity certain we know from the nature of God, from the teachings of his word, from the convictions of our own minds; and we also know, from the same sources, that many of these events will not take place without the intervention of our own free choices and agency. Practically there is no conflict in the case, though we may puzzle ourselves with the theory of it till we lose all heart either for prayer or labor. We are between the two sides of an archway, whose summit is wrapped in darkness. That the sides meet and support each other somewhere above us we know, for they both stand firm; and while the theorist sits still, complaining that he cannot see where they come together, the earnest soul moves on under their strong protection to the triumph and crown before him.

Disappears
in practice.

It is certain that all forms of error, wrong, and sin shall come to an end in the world; God has purposed and foretold the universal triumph of good over evil; yet the devout

heart is not thereby kept from praying for the blessed reign of love. We pray for what we know is sure to come, and our prayers ani-

mate us to struggle against the many evils about us, and so we become a part of the means by which God gradually works out his own holy counsels. We ask God to overrule all great movements among men and nations for the bulding-up of his kingdom, though he has assured us that he will thus use them. We lift up our cry to God, beseeching that the wrath of man may praise him; nor does the voice of our prayer falter, but rise with a stronger faith, when we remember that he has purposed what we pray for. Our prayers are not out of place because the thing prayed for is sure to come: they are natural; we cannot repress them, and our souls live by them.

Many prayers are offered which I am sure no one would dare to offer but for the certainty that the things prayed for will come to pass. Some of the prayers recorded in the Bible are of this class. Look especially at the im-

precatory Psalms. Why did David dare to pray, as he did, for the destruction of his enemies? If he had not known the purpose of God concerning them, his language might show a vindictive, revengeful, and even cruel spirit. But he was a man after God's own heart. He was inspired to foresee how God would deal with the wicked. It was his devotion to the will of God, and eagerness to see that will done, as he knew it would be sooner or later, which caused him to speak so terribly against the impious. He was not inhuman or merciless in his desires, so long as he but acquiesced in the declared purposes of God.

If we ought not to pray for events which are sure to take place, we ought not to pray for the conversion of the world to Christ. The kingdom of our Lord is destined to fill the earth; all other kingdoms shall be absorbed into it. It shall spread like leaven in human society, till the whole is leavened. Christ shall have the heathen for his inheritance; his banner shall float over all lands; every knee shall

bow to him; the glory of the millennial morning is on its way to us. It is fixed by the decree of God that swords shall be beaten into ploughshares, that the lion shall eat grass as the ox, that the leopard shall lie down with the kid and the wolf with the lamb, and that a little child shall lead them. The blessed state to which this beautiful imagery points us is predetermined of God. He will bring it to pass after his own eternal purpose. We know that this promise of God is sure. Yet we do not pray falteringly, but more freely and earnestly, on account of our knowledge. Our faith already sees the heavenly ages which are coming; and this "substance of things hoped for" only makes us the more instant in prayer, and all labors of love, and long-suffering, and patience.

Christ declares that the souls which have believed on his name dwell in perpetual safety. This we know. The Father has given them to him, and he is engaged to keep the least and feeblest of them all; they are his, and nothing

What follows if we may not pray for things decreed.

shall be able to pluck them out of his hand. Yet where were our comfort, under the daily sense of want and weakness, if we were not free to ask God to keep us, to uphold our goings, to pardon and cleanse us, to save us

Christian
persever-
ence.

from wandering, to bring our unsteady feet into the city built of gold? It is the will of Christ that all whom the Father has given him should be with him where he is, that they may behold the glory which he had before the world was. But this will of his does not hush the cry of our yearning spirits. It makes us bold to utter forth our longings; to venture near in strong supplication, and plead that the will of Christ may be perfected in us. We should languish, and consume away in soul, if forbidden to ask God for the glory he has promised us. The victories of the church and the joys of heaven, although made sure to us by the word of God, are not objects in which we have no present concern. Our prayers and good works enter into the providential means by which they are to be secured.

Victory of
grace.

Not without us, entering into his own mind and will by the appointed way, which is prayer, will God bring them to pass. He declares unto us what shall be in the end of the world, not to repress our zeal and longings, but that the life of prayer in us may unfold more vigorously, in hope of the glory of God.

2. Another class of objects, which it seems to me that we may properly pray for, is all those which we feel would be agreeable to the divine will, but which God has not foretold as certain. This remark brings us upon the plane of our most usual prayers. It would be agreeable to the will of God that every soul which hears the gospel, on any given Sabbath, should believe in Christ; and therefore we may pray for that result, though by no means sure of it, but the rather of its opposite. In the cases just considered, the objects to be prayed for were both desirable in themselves and sure to be reached; in the cases to which we now come, the element of future certainty is taken away. Only the desirableness remains.

What
would honor
or God,
though un-
certain, an
object of
prayer.

In themselves the objects would be for the glory of God; and therefore we may pray for them, though God, for the sake of some higher glory which they would prevent, may withhold them. No preacher of the gospel is sure that all who hear him will repent and believe; yet he knows that the honor of Christ would be promoted by their so doing, and hence he is all the time beseeching God that this great blessing may come upon them. When a measure of national policy is about to be taken up, in manifest opposition to the kingdom of Christ, no soul of godly citizens can fail to be lifted in prayer against it. The more likely any great public wrong is to be done, the sweeter the incense of our prayers for its prevention, while they go up from true and earnest hearts. The world is full of this class of occasions for prayer. We cannot look on any side of us without seeing much which we know that God abhors, yet which he may suffer to continue on, despite all our prayers and efforts to the contrary. Suppose the case of a man in power,—

Illustrations.

president, king, emperor. He is not an earnest follower of Christ. If he were, he might be a great helper in our Lord's work. Will the Holy Spirit change his worldly heart? This seems very doubtful to us when we look at him. But it is a thing to be longed for, both for the honor of God and the good of men. We may therefore pray for it, praying more earnestly the more appearances are against it. Human society, also, is full of evils: the powerful are haughty, the masses are envious, God is forgotten in the general worship of mammon. There is no sign that these evils are about to be done away. All that we see indicates not the near, but only the very remote triumph of the gospel. But shall our faith fail, or our strong prayers cease to go up, because the victory of right over wrong, which we know would be for the glory of Christ, is so wrapped about with clouds and darkness? He to whom that victory belongs has taught us, in the story of the importunate widow, that we may pray for a good object even when it is to us wholly uncer-

tain — when our wish that it may be granted involves the duty of hoping against hope.

Uncertainty may intensify the spirit of prayer.

If our sympathy with Christ be more passive than active, and we dwell on his final reign instead of the hard battles which lead to it, our prayers in the face of present opposition may falter. But if we deeply feel how great a thing any victory over evil is, and how able God is to give it even while we are speaking, we shall pray for it as earnestly as though we saw it within our certain grasp. When the heart of Jacob was set on a special favor, which he desired of God, he prayed more eagerly as his case seemed less hopeful. In his despair he laid hold of the angel, and wrestled with him. The love of God in us takes many forms. At one time we exult before him over the coming glories which he has promised; at another time we plead with him for blessings without which souls must perish, but of which prophecy has not spoken.

The Christian who ceases to pray for his Master's cause, as the progress of that cause

grows doubtful, sets himself against the bidding of God. He does violence to the spirit of God, which has been given unto him. Yielding himself to that spirit, his prayers will not become vague and cold. Outward difficulties will not daunt him, or raise any fear in his heart. Believing that with God nothing is impossible,

The soul
forced back
upon God. and that no true prayer is ever in vain,
he will come boldly to the mercy-seat,
and besiege it for blessings which have

not been promised. The answer may not come in the exact form he desires, but he is sure that it comes. That his prayer is heard he may not know now, but he shall know hereafter. It may then be revealed to him that his quiet waiting on God was itself the very substance of the things he prayed for. We must pray for objects which are uncertain, feeling that in themselves they would be for God's glory. We can have a faith in the exercise of which we shall believe that which appeals to our unbelief. A strong zeal for Christ may cause the greatest hinderance to depart and be carried into the sea. This look-

ing for victories of which there is no sign, solely because we would see God glorified in them, will gird us for instant labor. We shall forget

our weakness; nothing will seem too hard for us; through Christ strengthening us we can do what the exigency calls for; and so gradually we shall ourselves put obstacles out of the way, and secure, by our labor and patience, the things we asked God to grant us. It is one of our most joyous experiences when, after earnest prayer and toil amid great discouragements, we see the clouds that had settled upon us rolling off; when we may gird ourselves for new battles, in the strength of past triumphs, having learned that the darkest uncertainties which lower about our holy cause, are nothing to Him who gives us the victory and the dominion.

3. There remains but one other class of objects for me to speak of; those, namely, which are neither sure nor in their nature seem to be for the glory of God, but which would not conflict with the divine character, while they would be a blessed relief or com-

Prayer
stimulates
to labor.

fort to us. For all such objects I think it right that we should pray, on the simple ground that they are very dear to us. We ought not to feel that we are treading on forbidden ground, when we carry any experience or allotment, any trial or hope or fear entering into our present life, before God. It is not only the last, but the best and sweetest resource of the Christian, when other comforts fail, to be allowed to pray. Whether God will interpose or not we cannot tell; but how blessed to ask of him what we yearn for, when the very asking fills us with his inflowing life! Some good men, mostly in the Romish church, have thought it not wrong to pray for the dead who died in their sins. This custom I cannot rudely condemn, though the Bible seems to me to be against it. It is, no doubt, a profanation, especially as many practise it; it weakens the proper emphasis of this life, as the only time for coming into peace with God of which we have knowledge; yet I sometimes think that God may bear with us, not angry, but pleased

Whatever
the Chris-
tian heart
craves may
be prayed
for.

with our strong crying and tears, when our natural yearnings, which go out after loved and lost ones, are poured forth into his ear. Also, when our friends are sick unto death, and we see no hope for them but to die, the strong impulse is to plead for their lives; and we must thus plead, or we trample on our own hearts as well as the divine mercy. I believe that many such prayers are heard, and that our dead are given back to us alive by the healing power of God. The promise that the prayer of faith shall save the sick should, perhaps, not be understood now as it was in the days of the apostles. God does not manifest himself to us within the domain of nature, as he did to his people of old. His miracles are in these days inward and spiritual, rather. In this higher and nobler sense only he may choose to grant our desire; yet even the temporal mercy may be sought at his feet, and to lie before him as waiting suppliants prepares us for whatever issue he shall send.

One or two possible exceptions.

God's interposition mainly spiritual.

These sharp trials, which seem at first to preclude hope, do not kill the impulse to pray, but often make it burn with an intenser flame. The Christian may live on for months, and forget to lift his soul mightily unto God, while at peace in his worldly affairs. But when troubles fall thick, and the hand of God is heavy on him, his tongue is unloosed.

Trouble a
spur to
prayer.

Prayer becomes him more, the more his path grows dark. While the sea was smooth he let his Master sleep undisturbed on the pillow; but now that the storm is bursting in fury about him, and the great waves are going over his head, he springs to the almighty Helper, saying, "Save me, or I perish."

It is a question often raised, how far our prayers which are for personal and private blessings shall be made in public. Some persons, having a natural dread of publicity, say that they belong wholly to the closet and family. With this feeling I cannot agree. Our modesty should not carry us too far. The fellowship which we have one with another in Christ has

Public
prayers for
individuals.

its privileges and claims. Why should we shrink from telling it to the church, and asking them to help us bring our burden before God, if there be on our hearts some heavy load which God only can remove? "Brethren, pray for us," is the cry of the Christian's heart while he yearns after a wayward child, or longs for the enlargement of his own soul, or feels some dear object slipping daily out of his grasp. No doubt this privilege is often abused. Worldly men have heard themselves named in large assemblies, and made the subject of frantic appeals to God, in a way that has repelled them from the house of prayer. In all such cases some knowledge of men is needed, as well as the meekness and gentleness of Christ, that our prayers may be the voice of other hearts than our own, and not offend the finer feelings of any sensitive worshipper. But this sensitiveness may go too far. It, rather than the other extreme, is the danger of many Christians. We need to cultivate frankness. It does us good to tell men what God is doing for our souls. We ought to speak to

one another in hymns and spiritual songs. How are we to obey the command to pray for one another, if personal petitions are for the closet alone? if we never bring our private burdens to the public assembly? This whole matter will regulate itself, I believe, so that we need take no thought for it, but let the spirit of prayer in us flow out just as it will, in all places, while we are full of the mind of Christ, and of that childlikeness which makes us great in his kingdom. I have known prayers of this class to be made the occasion of denouncing enemies, or of eulogizing and courting friends; but they cease to be prayers just so far as thus abused; nor is this abuse any reason why we should cut ourselves off from the dearest refuge to which we may fly in our distress.

It cannot be wrong for us to do, in a spirit of brotherly love, what Christ did so often for his troubled friends. Since he wept and prayed at the grave of Lazarus, we may call on God for our afflicted brethren. St. Paul repeatedly asked the churches to pray for

An undue
sensitive-
ness.

him, assuring them that they were always mentioned in his prayers. A pastor cannot preach the gospel with much hope, if the Spirit of Heaven be not all the time breathed

Scriptural
view. about him in the supplications of his people. I think we should carry all these interests, so dear to one or another of us, yet often so uncertain, before God—the conversion of our families, the safety of absent friends, the cause of the needy, the infirm, the bereaved. He has encouraged us to do this,—not by revealing to us his own will in the case, but by assuring us that he is a God of compassions. We come to him not knowing just what he will do, or whether our request be in the highest sense right and proper; yet yearning for the particular blessing, and sure that he pitieth us as a father his children. We lay our case at his feet, while he bends in loving-kindness over us; and the witness of his Spirit with ours fills us, in that very moment, with a peace which needs not to be increased, and which no denial of our special requests can take away.

The triumph of prayer is the submissive spirit in which it culminates. Oh, what a victory it is for the Christian when he can say, "My soul is as a weaned child"! Let us strive for this faith,—that in their noblest meaning all our prayers are indeed answered. If we lack this conviction we shall go on mourning in our pilgrimage. What deeper sorrow can we reach than the belief that God does not hear our prayers? How painful our blindness if we fail to see the answer because it comes not in such form as our poor hearts chose for it! If all things are for the sake of the life of Christ which is in us, whatever God sends is his Amen to our supreme desire. The Good Shepherd is surely leading us to just the place we would find; therefore let him lead us by the way which is hardest, even though it be the valley of the shadow of death, if his own wisdom so appoint. We may not see the blessing, so as to find in it what we most sought, till after many days; perhaps never, while we see through a glass darkly, but only when we

A submis-
sive spirit.

see as we are seen. The treasure is veiled to our present sight, but it is laid up for us where no thief approacheth. It is safe in that radiant land to which shadows and disappointments never come. Will it not be an occasion of immeasurable joy, when the veil is lifted, to find that all the true prayers which we offered on earth are indeed answered? that the desires of our hearts have ripened into immortal fruits, and that we shall feed upon them in the house not made with hands, while the Lamb, which is in the midst of the throne, leads us unto living fountains of water?

Shall
know, at
length, that
all true
prayers are
heard.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FRUITS OF PRAYER.

ALL true prayers are answered, as we shall find in heaven, if not on earth. Yet the delays to answer, either seeming or real, with which God often tries us, may be taken as positive denials. The praying heart which thus takes them is tempted to grow weary of prayer, and to say that it is a profitless service. Yet, even granting that the things for which the Christian prays are withheld, it does not follow that he prays in vain; for we are to consider the reflex influence of prayer. The life of prayer is a school to the believing soul; in it one finds a discipline which should ever keep him from feeling that he prays to no profit. It is of these inner fruits of prayer, variously named its philosophical or subjective

A tempta-
tion.

influence, its discipline, its reflex power, that I will now speak. The Christian has a rich answer to all his prayers in the noble training which they are to his own soul, though the special things asked of God should never come.

Faithfulness to any religious duty makes the soul better. "Thereby shall good come unto thee," is the dear assurance with which God calls us into his service. This is the certain reward of all well-doing. If we give to the needy, we know that to give is more blessed than to receive. The benefactor is always the chief beneficiary. He that watereth is watered also himself. He shall reap bountifully who sows bountifully. We save our lives by losing them. Whoever labors most in the Redeemer's name has the largest measure of blessedness. In the accumulation of this inward and spiritual wealth, if in no other sense, the words of St. James are true: "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

But, leaving these general statements, let me

specify some of the fruits which grow in the soul under the influence of a life of prayer.

1. One of these blessed inner fruits or rewards is the knowledge of God which comes to us through our prayers. If we hear of any noble or marvellous thing, yet strange to us, we do well to seek it out and to enter so far as we can into its meaning and life. It may claim this of us for its own sake, and our souls are blessed and enlarged in paying it their homage. The structure and history of our planet are to the geologist a fascinating study. The heavens show a vast field of inquiry to the watchful eye; their grandeur and mystery are a challenge to us to search their depths. The science of mind also, more than any material science, has a claim on our regard. What are the most wonderful adjustments, motions, and subtile forces in the outer world by the side of that human spirit which can trace them out and make them work together for its own pleasure! And if our minds be so worthy of study, how much more the mind of an angel or archan-

Knowledge
of God
comes by
prayer.

All study
of truth en-
nobling.

gel! And if we are lost in wonder over the powers of the spirits before the throne, what

shall we say of the King himself, in whose presence they veil their faces?
 God the greatest of truths.

It must be an infinitely greater thing to know God and enter into his blessed life than to study out the creatures of his power.

But every science has its instruments and methods, without which it could make no progress. The geologist could do nothing but for the earthquake, the volcano, the action of water and of ice, leaving behind them a record of by-gone millenniums, and bringing the central parts of our globe within reach. The astronomer has his glass and his calculus, by which the heavens are made to give up their secrets.

Every science has its instruments. Mental science grows by reflection upon our own inner life, whose varying phenomena the wonderful organ of consciousness enables us to note and record. And so there is a means, an indispensable method and instrument, to be used in gaining a knowledge of God. It is by prayer alone that the soul of man may come near to God,

and behold and study his attributes. The student of nature may learn something of God. Self-study brings one where God's voice is heard. But no man, however observing or thoughtful and acute, is able to know God save in the way of prayer. This is the sweet ministration for which he that would find out God must wait. Prayer opens the heavens, and makes them shine. By it we climb the ladder whose top is within the veil. Drawing near to God, we find him drawing near to us; his life comes into us as the ocean-tide into the river, and we flow into him as the river into the sea. It is prayer which brings us to the point where the human life mingles with the divine. In no way save by its blessed ministrations can we rise to God; his ways are higher than our ways, and his thoughts than our thoughts, till the spirit within us cries, "Abba, Father." When we have learned what we can about him by searching in nature, and have scanned his glories as holy men tell them to us, and have questioned our own understanding and reason, we are yet with-

Prayer the
instrument
of divine
science.

out that true knowledge of him for which our spirits thirst. We are like one who would search the heavens with unaided eye, or expound the story of the earth without going down into its depths, or tell us what is in man while regardless of self-study. Whatever we have found out in other ways, new words of glory, wisdom, and love will open to us in God as we grow into the habit of prayer. While we tread this path with willing feet, God reveals to us what he hides from the wise and prudent; divine truths never known to the mere sage

are clear to the praying child. Hence the wonder often seen in actual life: the philosopher sitting at the feet of the peasant and listening with awe to his unlettered master, who tells him of a world he has failed to find. The weak things are stronger than the mighty; the foolish things confound the wise. Prayer has never brought the great man who thus wonders into fellowship with God. He beholds the mighty Ruler of worlds, but not the Father of his own spirit. He sees justice, skill, and power, but not the

No true
knowledge
of God by
other
means.

depths of long-suffering, forgiveness, and pitying love in our God. When his feet can go no farther, the praying soul spreads its wings and flies away to be at rest in loving arms. Where his eye sees but a speck of nebulous matter, prayer reveals to his lowly brother bright regions of divine goodness, radiant attributes clustered in perfect harmony. To the prayerless heart God is only a remote force. There is in him no nearness, no fatherly tenderness, no beauty of patience and compassion, that it should desire him.

How sadly this view of God, beyond which we never get, save in prayer, belittles him to our minds! He is a Father full of all those thoughts and feelings which become a father's heart. Though he is unchanging in his essence and character, no tongue can tell in how many sweet ways he shows that he is love. His tender emotions are as various as the experience of his children; and each feeling that moves his heart is the answer of love to some want, or fear, or trouble, or hope in us. It is by prayer that we open our souls to this

fatherliness, receiving not only the knowledge of it, but the supreme blessedness which it gives. When we have sinned, and our hearts condemn us, if the penitence we feel be uttered in the form of a prayer for pardon, we shall find that God is merciful and gracious. Our going to him and casting the load of guilt down at his feet is met by the assurance in our hearts that he forgives sin. By praying amid calamities we learn his compassion. Telling him our grief, we find that he is a sympathizing Father. If we go to him in our perplexity, his infinite wisdom is the answer to our need. When we faint by the way, prayer brings him before us as the God who gives strength to the weary. Amid our changes and tossings to and fro, we turn to him as without shadow of turning. In our weakness prayer reveals to us his almighty power. If we cry to him in our trouble, we find him a God of comfort. Flying to him in our ignorance, he meets us as the omniscient One. Speaking to him out of our prosperity, we learn his loving kindness; and in the day of adversity he reveals

Something
in God
which an-
swers to
each hu-
man want.

himself to our praying hearts as a chastening Father. His eternity is the response to our brief mortal life; the strength which is in him stands over against the weakness in us; our humble and obscure lot carries us up to the glory in which he dwells; the sentence of death which we receive in our bodies is met by the eternal life abiding in him. Thus it is that our souls, communing daily with God, are always finding out some new proof of his infinite love.

A check-
ered lot de-
sirable. He places us in all kinds of allotments and experiences here — successes and reverses, joys and sorrows, pleasures and pains; and then, as we let the spirit of prayer in us take form according to this mingled and various life, one glory after another in his character is turned out to our view. The soul's observatory is its place of prayer. Divine excellences, revolving like the stars in the sky, are there manifested to it. It sees the King in his beauty. It looks on the things which are unseen and eternal. The confusion of the world dies far below it, and God comes into the still retreat to sup with it and it with him.

2. Another of these fruits of prayer is the strength it brings for the labors to which God calls us. The most honored servants of God in all ages have spent much time in prayer. The early patriarchs loved to be alone with God. That pastoral life which they lived was favorable to divine companionship. They led their flocks in the grassy wilderness, beside the soft-flowing streams, along the shady slopes of the mountains. Amid these scenes of nature they pitched their tents, and mused, and slept, sweetly conversing with the Father of their spirits. It was this discipline of prayer which fitted them to be the founders of the chosen nation, the receivers and keepers of the covenants of promise, the seed from which the Saviour of the world should spring.

Prayer gives strength for all duties.

The discipline of the patriarchs.

This loving walk with God empowered Moses for his arduous mission. He was putting on the needed strength for his work all the time that he kept the flocks of Jethro in Midian. In the judgment of some critics, he wrote the story of the upright man of Uz dur-

Moses.

ing that long retirement. It was the divine life coming down into his human life which prepared him to be the leader of Israel. In all his wanderings God gave him audience, refreshed and enlarged his soul, made him strong to meet Pharaoh, to deliver his enslaved people, and to bear with their slow-heartedness and murmurings. Elijah passed much of his time with

Elijah. God in the caves and by the brooks of the desert; and the fruit of that holy fellowship is seen in his bold reproofs of Ahab, in his challenge to the priests of Baal, in his brave witnessing against the corruptions of his time. He grew weak, and sank down into hopelessness, as he missed the inspiration which came to him through his prayers. Intercourse with God gave to all the saints of other days power for those deeds at which we now marvel. Through this blessed channel came their faith, by

All saints. which they subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of

the aliens. Even our blessed Lord was in this way made strong for his toils and sufferings. A night of prayer, rather than a night of slumber, was his chosen refreshment. The mind unbends itself in this holy exercise. It is a sweet relaxation. It renews the youth of the soul. Our continuance in well-doing depends on these refreshings from the presence of God. The heart of the Christian grows weary amid his outward duties. No care for the body seems to help him; the source of his discouragement is not in the weakness of the flesh, but in the unwilling spirit. He has lost the deep sense of God's presence; and it is only as he raises his soul to God in prayer, till God comes down and meets him anew, that the darkness gathers up its folds, and his light and peace return to him. The snare in which he was caught lets go its hold; his feet are taken out of the miry clay, and set upon a rock; the duties which had grown irksome are his joy again, and he sees before him a plain path. No prayerless persons were ever full of good works. The

Christ re-
freshed by
prayer.

The refuge
of the
weary.

commands of God are a weariness to all such, hard sayings which they cannot hear. The Confessions of Augustine show that prayer was his life, and that his vital breath failed as he ceased to pray; Luther was sure to study well only as he had prayed well; and the feeling of every believing heart is an amen to these testimonies.

But there are duties for the church no less than for the individual. These, requiring our united action, will be properly done only as we are together fitted for them by union in prayer. There would not be much faltering in the work of the church if its members were all the time praying with one heart and mind. This is the royal way to unity of action, such action as God never lets fail. The lines of our influence are apt to cross one another, and do little more than make us all weak against the common foe, while we are not drawn together to the mercy-seat. That is not only the point of view, but of inspiration also, where we are to make ready for the battle. As we join in the same prayers,

Augustine
and Luther.

The power
of a pray-
ing church.

the same life comes down into all our souls. That life, the gift of our everliving Head, heals all divisions. The many members are made one body by it. In the consciousness of this unity we can bring our efforts to bear on a common object; and no Christian work is too hard for us, since God works in us to will and to do. We are not merely praying individuals, but a praying church, and hence a progressive and victorious church. Not merely one by one, but all together, we must often climb the heights of prayer; thus alone shall we bend our eyes forward as the eye of one man along the way of our covenant in Christ. On these heights we are above evil desires, and breathe that air of heaven which begets in us a common zeal. We cannot too often look thus away over the field on which we are to struggle for a common triumph. It is the united prayers of the church in which separate interests are forgotten, and

Prevents
alienation. a single love fills all souls, which bring us shoulder to shoulder in the good fight of faith, which keep the blood-bought raiment of our spirits clean and white, which save

us from doubt or weakness when the battle is hard against us. Whatever the work to which the members of a church are set, praying together often as dear brethren and friends makes them conscious of the silken cord which binds them all to Christ. The burden upon them is light, however heavy in itself; for it rests on many shoulders, which prayer is making strong to bear it. They have God dwelling in them; hence their hands are not feeble, neither do they fight as one that beateth the air. Every step they take is forward and determined, and each blow struck for the truth goes to its mark with a sure aim and a resistless energy.

3. One other fruit of prayer, which would make it our greatest blessing though it did only this for us, is its ennobling power in the soul. It is a divine education, the school of our spiritual nature. It unfolds, enlarges, and refines that in us which makes us the children of God. The prayers which we offer come back into our souls bringing God with them. Thus we are

Makes the members one in feeling and aims.

Prayer ennobles the soul.

partakers of his holiness, and he changes us into his own image by his indwelling.

It is not true that we must needs be like the worldly influences about us. Man was made to have dominion over the world. But how is one to be saved from sinking to the level of his earthly lot? How may he become noble

Our proper dominion. in the midst of mean surroundings, gentle amid the rude, pure amid the

corrupt? Whence the possibility of a Joseph in Egypt, and a Daniel in Babylon? Let us look a little at this. By a well-known law, to which the human soul is subject, it grows to be like that with which it is in daily and loving companionship. If it be wholly occupied with trivial things, it will itself grow to be meagre and trifling. So wonderful are its aptitudes that it can shape itself to any pursuit which it persistently follows. It can learn to

Two opposite tendencies in us. delight itself in studying the most intricate problems of philosophy, or to be content with the simple rounds of

manual toil. There are tendencies in it to which it may yield till drawn to the lowest level of

vice ; other tendencies, which, if cherished and followed, will bring it to the summits of virtue. Now it so happens in this present life that we are exposed to many influences which help the tendency downward. Much time must be given to duties which do not nourish what is noblest in the soul. Hence it has ever been the habit

of the wisest men to be interested in some ennobling object, thus saving themselves from the influence of the earthly work which they are set to do. The wise merchant, or mechanic, or farmer has his books of history and poetry. He surrounds himself with statues, paintings,

or other things within his reach, which minister to his love of the beautiful ; and thus he unfolds in himself those finer powers which his worldly business might enfeeble or

destroy. Certain ancient sages taught that God placed the starry heavens where we may behold them, to save us from the belittling influence of our earthly life. We all have felt, many times, the wonderful contrast between a clear sky spangled

Our sur-
roundings
may help
the down-
ward ten-
dency.

A common
escape.

What
pagan sages
thought.

with glittering worlds above us, and the scenes amid which we are forced to do our common work. We know from experience that studying the stellar universe keeps one from the narrowing tendency of his secular affairs. He who loves to trace out the laws of any province in nature, who delights in the creations of artistic genius, who cultivates his better qualities of heart by wise reading and thought, who muses much upon the beauty and order of God's works, has a safeguard against lower attractions. His daily toils may be unfriendly to the wants of the soul, but he is bound to higher joys by a golden chain; he dwells in a serene life, to which the lowering influence of his employments cannot rise. He is among them, but not of them. While trivial things keep his hands busy, great thoughts are filling his soul.

All noble
study saves
from earth-
ly influ-
ences.

But studies of this class take time if intelligently carried on. They are often incompatible with other claims upon us, or they draw the mind away into empty dreams which it mistakes for truth. We cannot get the needed

discipline in scientific studies, save by giving to them long and painful labor. Nor is the intellect which they mainly strengthen our noblest part. Even æsthetic studies may leave what is best in us meagre and torpid. It is our spiritual nature, the capacity for holiness, which makes us like God. This is our crowning glory, placing us over all the works which God has made; by virtue of it we are his children. For the training of this supreme faculty he furnishes the same blessed means to us all. The laborer need not turn aside from his toil to find it. He whose thoughts soar to the stars is no nearer to it than the farmer in his garden. The gift is impartial. For our spiritual education God gives us himself. And he gives himself equally to all. We need not ascend on high to bring him down, nor search for him in the depths. He is near to us; and we enter into union with him, and grow divine in our souls, by partaking of his life as we find him in our prayers. The life

Human sci-
ence not
open to
many.

Dses not
appeal to
what is
highest in
us.

The best
education
possible to
all.

of prayer is an education which shames the discipline of the schools.

If you would make a weak and vicious man pure, keep him under the sway of a strong righteous man, and the work is done. The new atmosphere saves him; the greater draws after it the less. It is the weakness of our philan-

Why much philanthropy is weak. thropy that we do not lift up the fallen, scatter them one from another, and join them in constant society with

ourselves. We are afraid to do this even if we would, or if we could. The corrupt shrink downward from us as much as we recoil upward from them. We do not meet each other heart to heart. If we could make them feel that we are indeed their friends, and show ourselves such, an intimacy between them and us might spring up, whose power would lift them out of the pit. But where our love fails, that of God is most shown.

God would bind us to himself. He draws us unto himself. He is not a stranger to us, but our Father. He becomes such as we are, and even takes on

him the load of our guilt in the person of the Son. The more sinful we feel, the readier are we to fly

to his waiting arms when we see him as he is. Thus it is that he lifts up, cleanses and blesses, all his children who dwell with him in the life of prayer. He makes them his own companions. His life, flowing down into them through this union, deepens that spirit of prayer in them which they are always breathing upward to him. Their hearts grow around him as the vine around the oak, and so he lifts them away from grovelling things into the sweet and pure air of heaven. Nothing else which we can do is so important to us as our prayers. They lay open to us that Mind in which are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. They are a high communion with the Lord of lords. They attach the tendrils of our better self to a ladder whose top is lost in light. The more we mount up in our yearnings, the more are the riches of the divine nature disclosed to us. We may be chained down to the drudgeries of this world, but in spirit we partake of angels' food. We know what the sage meant when he said, "The soul grows beautiful as it draws near to

Prayer the
golden
chain.

God." Though dark in ourselves, we become radiant in God's presence, even as clouds turn to gold in the sunbeams.

If such be the fruits of prayer in the soul, what must I say in reply to those who complain

that they have been praying all their lives, and have found no such blessed fruits? But do those who return empty in soul from the mercy-seat

remember that that may not be prayer which they so name? The mouth may be full of beseeching words, and the spirit have no indwelling of God. It is when the tongue answers to the heart that we truly pray. If we make many prayers only because God claims them, they will be a weariness to us; it is while they are the voice of an inward longing that they refresh the soul. If we speak to God from our lips, and not from the depths of our hearts, or if we fail to find him, and merely pray into the air, the re-

coil upon us will be spiritual death, rather than life. It is the open soul that God fills. What are all his visits to the man who has not eyes to see or ears to hear?

Why many
are not
blessed in
their
prayers.

The soul
must pray.

Let such an one stand under the canopy of night when all her hosts are shining, and the still depths almost whisper their secret, yet to him it is no more than "a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors." What is it to him though all knowledge and all mystery be unfolded before him? That which makes the perceiving soul wiser only confirms him in his ignorance. It does him no good to walk through galleries of art, to be told of classic ages, to sit down where prophets and lawgivers once sat. The blessed feet of Christ have left no aroma for him on Judea's plains. He is not made better, but worse, by contact with noble and sacred things. Great influences seem to dwarf him, as the Alpine peasant is dwarfed in soul amid the sublime glories of his mountains. If we do not love what is above us, and long for union with it, beholding it will but sink us to a lower depth. Just here, I think, we come upon the secret of the evil sometimes charged against our prayers. We are not lifted, and enlarged, and glorified by them for the reason that we do not really pray.

No truth
blesses the
unthinking.

Our souls are not open to God. Is it a lack of charity to say that many prayers are an idle pretence, a form of speech only, in which the soul comes not near to God? The glories and wonders of the divine character, so far from blessing, do but palsy the unwilling minds on which they are forced. We may pay a lip-service gathered from the speech of angels, fragrant as flowers of paradise, glowing with God's own breath; but if we pray not in spirit, it is a vain oblation. It is not prayer.

Our pray-
ers profit-
less be-
cause we
do not
thirst for
God.

We do not speak out of a hungering and thirsting soul. Our hearts do not yearn to dwell in God, and that he may dwell in them. It is not a form of words from which the heart is left out, but the rising of an open soul into an infinite Father's arms, which brings the fullness of God into it, and makes it holy as he is holy.

Astronomers say that our planet and its fellow globes, and all other systems of worlds, together with the solar system, seem to revolve about a single vast sphere, which is the centre

of the universe of matter. Whether such indeed be the truth or not, we may never find out in this life; but we know surely that all the countless host of minds does revolve about one infinite and all-sustaining Father. From him an energy goes out which is able to hold and forever guide in safety each individual of that host. This mighty influence, if we but open our hearts to it, will touch a sympathetic chord in us, and bring us into fellowship with God. If that divine beam has already touched our souls, let us keep them open to its larger incoming. Let us cherish every yearning we feel for the radiant centre from which it springs. Yielding to the blessed One who so sweetly draws us, let us live in his light, and receive of his life into ours, till he renews in us his own likeness. Thus shall we secure a safe orbit to our souls for all the future. They shall not perish or fall away into darkness when they pass out of the horizon of time, but be as stars in another firmament, where they shall shine forever.

The source
of all spiritual
life.

CHAPTER V.

THE POWER OF PRAYER.

No thoughtful person will deny the ennobling influence of a life of prayer. Even atheists have said that praying is the highest act of the soul. But when we speak of prayer as a procuring power, operating outside of ourselves

A procur-
ing force.

to obtain blessings which otherwise would not come, many are inclined to doubt. Do our prayers reach beyond the fixed course of nature, and move the arm of God to interpose for us?

This is the question, which we answer with a hearty "yes," while those who look at it from grounds of science alone are tempted to say "no." The following is a specimen of the tests they have offered to settle the dispute: Let part of the patients in a hospital where all are treated alike

have the prayers of Christians for their return to health, and if those prayed for get well while many of the others do not, the power of prayer will be shown. Our sceptical friends

A worth-
less test. will then admit, they say, that prayer may bring a supernatural force to bear which is effectual where natural means fail. We may doubt, however, whether they would keep their promise to believe, even if the experiment they propose were made. Denying the efficacy of prayer in the outset, they would say, in view of its effects, that the result was due to some subtile cause or agency of nature which had been overlooked. As an umpire between naturalism and supernaturalism, the test is therefore worthless. The man of science and the man of faith will each view the case from his own position, and hence each will be confirmed in what he already believes. It is because the experiment would be futile that the proposal of it seems to us disingenuous. Our faith in the power of prayer is too sacred a thing to be thus rudely mocked.

This offensive challenge is often invited, I

admit, by the unwise utterances of a class of Christians. A proposal to test the value of our prayers by scientific methods is hardly more irreverent than what we sometimes hear on the other side. To affirm that God will give us anything we ask him for, as is sometimes hastily and thoughtlessly done by ignorant exhorters, carries a painful shock to the intelligent and devout soul. Only those who know nothing yet as they ought to know will venture to speak of God as if they understood him altogether. They have yet to learn what it is to say from the heart, "Thy will be done." The man who says that when he wants money he kneels down and prays, and then goes to the post office and finds it enclosed to him in a letter, must be a very godly man not to seem irreverent; we must know him to be incapable of anything which is not the exact truth, or we shall suspect him of some effort beforehand, some very strong appeal made in some way to persons of known charity, which is really the procuring cause of the answer to his prayer. Do the good men who profess to believe that

The chal-
lenge pro-
voked.

God supplies their daily needs because of their prayers alone acknowledge as frankly as they should what pains they take to acquaint the Christian public with their wants? If any are tempted thus to belittle the doctrine of the efficacy of prayer, and to mingle artifice with their faith in order to bear themselves out, it may be well for their sake that some gauge or test out of that realm of natural agencies to which they affect indifference should from time to time be proposed. But if scientific tests of prayer attempt a higher range, if they imply doubts as to its full and complete power with God when offered in a proper spirit, they are wholly out of place. The question is one which they cannot touch; for the world of prayer is wholly above the world of science, nor can the methods of one ever be inferred from those of the other.

The Bible teaches us to regard as impious those who would apply a test from the realm of nature to a purely spiritual force. Who ever doubted the propriety of what Christ said when he was tempted in the wilderness? Yet his

replies there given to his adversary put this whole subject in its true light. He would not command the stones to be made bread. He would not cast himself down from a pinnacle of the temple. His power to work miracles was given to him for high spiritual ends, and he would not idly subject it to the trial of natural law. He would not degrade and profane it by using it to please an enemy who was seeking to destroy him. Do those doubters who ask for scientific proofs of the power of prayer consider who their chief forerunner was? As Christ met him we must meet them. They, no less than he, pervert the doctrine of the supernatural which the efficacy of prayer involves. Let them read the story of the temptation. It most remarkably anticipates their proposal. They wish us, who believe that prayer moves the divine arm, to do essentially what the tempter asked Christ to do. They seek in our case, as he did in our Lord's, to gauge the power which we have with God. The control of God over nature, which he exerts in response to the prayers of his people, is for

high and spiritual ends. We do not wish him to show it, at the demand of his enemies, to gratify a mere scientific spirit or please obstinate doubters. This mighty power is sacred. God uses it only for his own glory and the good of his children. They have no part in it who would make it bow to the idols of science. To pray for the recovery of the sick, with a view to putting God's power to the test, is to be utterly without the spirit of prayer. Prayer is no form of words used for experiment. Whoever comes to God must believe that he is the rewarder of them that seek him. We are asked to pray for a given object in that doubting spirit which makes prayer impossible.

The temptation of Christ in the wilderness is not the only case in point. We read of certain Scribes and Pharisees who came to Christ and said, "Master, we would seek a sign of thee." They had no faith in our Lord's Messiahship, or in his divine power, but doubted, and wished to put him to the test. They were not open to conviction. If he should cast out devils, they would say that he did it

Doubt re-
pelled.

through the prince of devils. Hence he declined their proposal; did not give that which is holy unto dogs, or cast his pearls before swine. His answer to them was essentially the same as to his great adversary — “An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given it.” The power of prayer being supernatural, we can never prove it by scientific tests, or to those who admit only natural causes.

There is, then, a spirit in those who would move God by their prayers which is indispensable to success. If we have not that spirit we cannot pray as God requires; and it is only as we thus pray that he has promised to hear us. He has not promised to hear doubters, or those who try him with the methods of unbelief. How can we meet the challenge to pray if the terms of the challenge do not permit us to have the spirit of prayer? Look as carefully as we will through the Scriptures, and we shall find no promise of divine aid in answer to our prayers which is not conditioned upon a right spirit in us. Where has God en-

The spirit
which God
regards.

couraged the doubting heart to put him to the proof? Though he sometimes pleads with his people as if he were a man, he has not said that the soul which tempts him shall be heard. "All things whatsoever ye ask *believing*, ye shall receive," are Christ's words. Here is no promise that God will answer our prayers just to prove to us that he *can*; that he will hear us irrespective of the feeling in which we come to him. True discipleship on our part is assumed. It was to his own friends and followers that Christ spoke. Nor did he make the great promise indiscriminately even to these. Only as their souls were in a believing frame, knit to God in a perfect oneness of will and desire, could they offer the effectual prayer of the righteous man. This was the grand feature in our Lord's own prayers. He and his Father were one, and he came to do that Father's will. It was from this point of view that he looked at his sufferings; and his prayer was heard in its true intent, though the cup from which his sensitive nature shrunk did not pass from him. No true child of God, no one whom

God has promised to hear, prays for what is contrary to the will of God; those objects which seem to him desirable, but concerning which the divine purpose is not clear, he prays for only as Christ prayed for deliverance in the garden. When our wills are in perfect accord with the will of God, and we walk by faith, not by sight, — when we long for only those things which are in the purpose of God, and are toiling for them as our supreme object in life, — we have that state of mind which alone can pray in the truest sense, and all that we pray for will be granted us.

If any say that the objects of such praying are sure to be granted whether we pray for them or not, since God will surely do all that he has purposed, the objection is valid so far as it goes. But it does not prove that our prayers are needless; it is no cause for omitting to pray. Things which are the same in themselves, or so far as God is concerned, are different to us according to the frame of spirit in which we receive them. If we have brought ourselves into union with God by praying for them, they will come to us as

The same things different to us.

blessings ; but if a prayerless life has separated between us and him, so that our deepest yearning is not for what he may please to send us, none of his dealings with us will have in them the blessed savor of answers to prayer: be they according to our natural wishes or against them, in either case our hearts will be left empty and wretched. Whoever offers the prayer which God always hears, can put his whole heart into this brief sentence: "Thy will be done." There

All prayers but one. is no form of prayer possible to him which does not grow out of this one petition. When our souls are renewed, cleansed, and sanctified, — when the great work for which Christ came absorbs our time and energies, and is the source of our fondest hopes — it can be no small or temporal thing which we shall long for in our prayers. All the things which we most desire will be a part of the unfolding counsels of God; and the same events which are a cursing to such as lack this desire, will crown our lives with blessing. Only those who pray for the reign of Christ will have eyes to see him when he comes in his kingdom. Their souls

shall be awake, and they shall rejoice as those who never pray cannot, knowing what is meant when the floods clap their hands.

In arguing that prayer has power with God, I make no use of what are to my own mind, and I doubt not to all Christians, the sweetest proofs of such power. We could fill volumes out of our experience — all kinds of exigencies and trials, some temporal, others spiritual — in which we had blessed witness that our prayers were heard. No Christian who has passed through times of religious awakening, who has seen the various enterprises of the church saved out of great perils, who has longed for the souls of wicked companions, who has had dear friends given back to him out of the sides of the grave, doubts that prayer moves the arm of God. He is sure that God has respect unto the humble, and does not despise their prayer. The history of the church and Christian biography are a great treasure-house of proofs that prayer has this blessed power. But they are proofs whose force many do not feel. They are the paradise of the praying soul whose flowery

Christian
experience.

walks the foot of doubt will trample, if admitted too freely among them. We go out of the enclosure, where we see the victories of prayer blossoming all about us, and seek some common ground, if any be not able to enter into our faith.

Consider what men do when they deny that God is moved by our prayers. They imply that God is not sincere in many of his sweetest promises and assurances. On what page of the

Bible do we not find some intimation

What follows if

prayer has no force.

that he is a prayer-answering God?

The explicit declarations that he is

such a God are almost without num-

ber. Not only are they thus numerous; they are the sweetest words in all Scripture. Our souls feel the benediction when we hear Christ say, "Enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret, and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." No gainsayings or criticisms of unbelief can ever spoil the aroma of the words, "If ye, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much

more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him!"

Promises of
God.

Take out of the Bible all those words which teach that prayer obtains blessings from God, and what remains would be a firmament without its stars. And while we see them all clustered there, shining in beauty on every page, what follows if they have no meaning? Who is this that makes God a deceiver? Far from us be such a thought. God is true, and therefore he hears prayer. The Strength of Israel cannot lie; and hence are they indeed stars, and not empty meteors, which make luminous his holy book. It is impossible that he should ever say, "Seek ye my face in vain."

But the impulse to pray, which is in all men, witnesses, no less than the Bible, to God's regard for our prayers. If our prayers were never heard, yet all men are so made that they will and

must pray. 'By a necessity of his nature every one has the praying instinct.

Natural
impulse to
pray.

Not only is prayer the vital breath of the Christian; it is the spontaneous cry of all human hearts. That is a good definition of man

which describes him as the creature who prays. Even the profane oaths which we hear from angry men on the streets are degenerate prayers. They show how far the praying instinct in us may fall if suffered to come under the power of sin. Men are never so lost as not to cry unto God, and beseech his help, though only in this blind and shocking way. Let that impulse be delivered from the bondage of sin; let Christ be formed within it, and breathe his holy life through it, and those same men, instead of degrading it as they now do, would pray the prayers of an Elijah, a Stephen, or a Paul. We need have no fear that any doubts of science, or cavil and ridicule of whatever kind, will drive prayer out of the world. Men will continue to pray as long as their humanity is in them. Nature triumphs over those who make a show of disdain; for she forces even them, in times of great distress or sudden anguish, to cry out for the living God.

But what follows if there be no dear Father who hears and answers prayer? All must see what the inference is,—the same as from the

promises of the Bible. It follows that our God has played us false, that he breaks to our hope the loving words he compels our hearts to speak. Our whole life is thus made a poor mockery, the vainest of delusions, the most utter and pitiless deception that was ever contrived. Our nature is all the time forcing us to do what is at bottom a lie. God has so made us that we are ever asking him for what he never grants. Such is the theory, and we see that it represents God as deceiving us at the centre of the soul. The same faith which makes good to us what is most sacred in our own hearts confirms to us the scriptural doctrine of the power of prayer. If we would have any consolation, if we would trust our own instincts, or lay any basis of trust one towards another, we must believe that God is moved by prayer. He does not mock us with a stone, but gives us the bread we ask when our spirits cry out of their hunger to him.

We are also to remember that our prayers avail with God, or the noblest culture of our lives is the fruit of a deception. Not only are

we forced to pray, but we acquaint ourselves with God, and are lifted up and ennobled in all our faculties by a life of prayer. Can it be that the offering which does so much for us is a vain oblation? Is it rational to hold that we must put ourselves under the shadow of a religious fraud, and pray all our days as if God heard us, though our words are only beating the air, in order that we may reach the highest manhood or womanhood possible to us? If prayer be indispensable to our best training, if no one can afford to neglect it, then must it have power with God; for men will not practise it while persuaded that it lacks this power; or if they do, it is a kind of self-imposition, abhorrent to reason, the tendency of which must be to make them, not better, but worse.

The conclusion to which reason drives us, then, is, that all true prayers do move the will of God. He answers them, though not always in such ways as our partial wisdom might prefer. God chooses the form of the answer, and so far as it differs from our present wish it is some-

Our best
culture not
due to a
fraud.

thing higher and better. His thoughts are above our thoughts while bestowing his favors upon us. He withholds the imperfect that he may give the perfect. It does not enter into our hearts how great things he prepares for us. If we dwelt in him and he in us, and our souls were fully conscious of such indwelling, we should see that he more than grants all our petitions ; that which we in our blindness deem a withholding of blessing would be to our opened eyes what we ask for, not stinted in measure, but shaken together and running over. In the Lord's prayer is the petition, "Give us this day our daily bread." Many of God's poor have offered that prayer in the morning, and laid their aching heads down at night with no morsel to relieve bodily hunger.

The answer often better than the request.

A common case.

But was the prayer unanswered? Far from it. Tell them it was not, and they will not believe you. They will keep on offering that prayer, soothed by it in some wonderful manner, having answer to it all the time in their souls, even while common food is denied them. We forget, in our doubts upon this subject, that man

liveth not by bread alone. We too often choose the lower form; it is well for us sometimes that God chooses only the higher form in which to answer our prayers. David said, "The Lord is

David. my shepherd; I shall not want." But if his comfort depended wholly on temporal things, he did not speak the truth; for he

was afterwards brought down more than once into great straits of worldly misfortune. Only so far as he was a man after God's own heart, longing for spiritual blessings, keeping his will in accord with the divine will, did his cup overflow, and none of his hope perish. The prayer

St. Paul. of St. Paul for the removal of the thorn in his flesh was answered, beyond his thought, in the words, "My grace is sufficient for thee." Our blessed Lord was once faint, and

sat thus by the well while his disciples were gone away to buy meat. Yet when they returned with food, he gave them to understand that he had already eaten. But no one

Christ at the well. had supplied him with physical sustenance. Then he announced to his wondering friends the great truth that there are spiritual

supplies for our wants with which no temporal supplies are worthy to be compared: "I have meat to eat that ye know not of. My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work."

We conclude, therefore, that all true prayers are answered; that they are answered as to the substance of their meaning, and in ways which would more than meet our largest expectation were we able to see just what is involved in the fulfilment of that divine will to which we have resigned ourselves. The agreement of desire between God and the believer who truly prays is such that God is said to pray in the believer. The fervent, effectual prayer of the righteous man is an "inwrought prayer." The preparation of the heart is from him who grants the heart's petition. The Spirit helpeth our infirmities; they are his groanings which we cannot utter when we find our souls burdened with a longing for some spiritual good. God worketh in us to will and to do; and hence in hearing our prayers he fulfils his own pleasure. Christ formed within our

The in-
wrought
prayer ef-
fectual.

hearts by faith, is, in the prayer we offer, interceding for us before the throne. Him the Father heareth always. He presents the golden vials from which the sweet incense is ever rising. He in whom we live is one with the Father; and his prayer must be heard, since God cannot deny himself.

Not only are the prayers we thus offer all answered, but many of them are so answered as to compel men, even in this life, to see the interposition of God. Far be it from me to preach the cold doctrine that we are not to expect answers to our prayers in the forms we now choose for them. The divine agency is still concerned in carrying forward the work of redemption. The renewal of a soul by the influences of the Holy Spirit is a supernatural event; and the keeping of that soul all along the hard and steep path of sanctification is a process which calls for the divine co-working. No one has lived long in the world without being forced to see some of those special providences which he cannot but regard as forth-puttings of the finger of God. In this same

catalogue of gracious wonders belong all those

answers to our prayers which are in

God proves
to us that
he hears
prayer.

the precise form of our present wish.

They make luminous the experience of every Christian. They encourage us

to ask for specific objects—the conversion of particular persons, the turning aside from us of impending evils, the sparing of lives which we hold dear, and on which Death seems to be fixing his grasp. How many such prayers have been

answered, thus strengthening the natural impulse to offer them! And they will continue to be offered, whether answered or not, in the form

of our first wish, so long as men are men, and we find ourselves crushed down by sudden sorrows, or in the

Our exact
wish some-
times met.

presence of unforeseen dangers. We are sure that there must be One who careth for us when we cease to be able to care for ourselves. There is comfort, there is hope; our foreboding hearts may take courage, for we are not alone, but He who heareth and answereth prayer is with us. Take this consolation away from us, and who would have any strength left to struggle longer?

Who would not fall by the way, and lie prostrate in hopelessness, saying, like the disheartened prophet, "It is enough, Lord; and now, if it please thee, I beseech thee take away my life"? God has given his people no occasion to pray this mournful prayer. Oftentimes has he heard them in the precise manner of their wish, sometimes bearing long with them, at other times appearing with his aid while they were yet speaking, or even preventing them with the blessings of his goodness. The last weapon we shall ever yield is the power to pray.

The last resort.

When all other hope fails, we may cry out to God for help. There is that in us which declares that it can brighten the clouds of adversity. No cavils of unbelief, no delays of divine succor, will ever make us doubt that in the spirit of prayer we may encounter every evil. It is able to disarm Death of his terrors. It causes the gates of the city of gold to open before our weary feet.

Not only, then, is it impossible that we should not keep on praying, but all our right requests are granted, either in the form we wish or in

some way divinely chosen for us, which is far higher and better. Since God is love, and has made us praying creatures, we resign to his wisdom all those interests concerning which he does not as yet seem to hear us. We know

that he does hear us, so far as we have a prayerful spirit in our praying. He has given us many proofs that we seek not his face in vain, and the proofs which are up to this time withholden shall be given us hereafter. Not only do the past and present belong to us under God, but the future is ours also.

Bereaved one, the little life which was so precious to you, and for which you prayed so earnestly that it might still gladden and fill your

mother's heart, has not been taken from you in rude mockery of your trust. He

who fulfilled the great wish of his Son, making him victorious over sin, though not hearing his prayer to be delivered from the cross, will sustain your sinking spirit. Walking with God in quietness, your will resigned to his, and your eye open to see the unfolding of his fatherly counsels, you shall have songs in the night.

Our hope
often ex-
ceeded.

The be-
reaved
mother.

Yea, it shall come to pass in your evening time that it shall be light. And when you clasp your treasure once more, in the place where it is laid up for you, you will wonder that you were ever tempted to think your prayers unheard of God, while you are pouring forth the notes of praise to his goodness, who planned your life with all its changes precisely as was needed, that your joy and blessedness in his presence might be complete. When the elders of the church are called, and pray over the sick, the prayer of faith does save the sufferers. It may not save them in the poor sense of prolonging this earthly life in the flesh; such miraculous interpositions, needed in the infancy of the church, may be withheld in our day: the world is older now, and should not require to be persuaded of the divine mission of Christianity by such means; but that prayer, even though unanswered to our sight, does nevertheless accomplish all that our faith can wish. We shall see, when we no longer see through a glass darkly, that God has answered our prayers in ways infinitely better for us than our slow hearts prefer-

The dying.

red. We shall know, knowing as we are known, that the life of unanswered prayers for us would have been the life which we in our Our lot in life. weakness chose, but which God, with a view to fulfilling all our desire, did not deal out to us — mercifully granting us, instead thereof, such temporal allotments as he foresaw would be sure to work out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HOUR OF PRAYER.

THE Bible has no more tender words than those which invite us to meet God in prayer; and there is, in our heart of hearts, a voice ever responding to those words. The fact, therefore, that we do not easily learn to delight in prayer, but shrink from it as an irksome duty, witnesses to the bondage of the divine nature within us. Our spirits are not

What
shrinking
from prayer
proves.

free, but sold under sin. That to which our holiest impulse moves us is dreaded, owing to the law in our members to which we are in captivity.

Our higher nature fears to do what it would, by reason of the lower nature, which has dominion over it. This explanation of our reluctance to pray, when the duty first begins

to be urged upon us, is pictured in the story of Adam. Before his disobedience it was a joy to him to have God near, but he drew back from that pure presence as soon as he had sinned; the child's yearning in him came into bondage to the feeling of guilt. God called to him as aforetime, in the cool of the day, saying, "Where art thou?" but he was afraid, and hid himself among the trees of the garden.

But a time comes, in the life of every soul which has been made a new creature in Christ Jesus, when that long-lost pleasure returns to it. The words, "Enter into thy closet," are not a stern command, as in the days of its estrangement from God, but the sweetest of all invitations. That soul has been disin-
 thralled. It is no longer in subjection
 to the body of death, but has been
 delivered into the liberty of the sons of God. Its best loved spot is the place where God daily meets it, and it goes to that meeting hungry and thirsting for divine communion:

The free
 soul loves
 to pray.

The moments set apart for our secret de-

votions are "the children's hour" in God's family. All know how it is wont to be in the household where love reigns. The child grows weary of playing, and steals away to the room where the father is. It finds the door ajar, and hears from within a voice of welcome. Entering freely in, it climbs upon the father's knees, and is folded in his arms. There it hangs about his neck, and interchanges with him the words and kisses of affection. It hears tender replies to any story of wants or troubles which it brings, and thus its heart is made to overflow with comfort and gladness.

Now, it is just in this way, though with unspeakably more joy, that the children of God learn to turn towards him, and say, "Abba, Father." The new-born spirit is forced to be, much of its time, in that temporal world which is full of wearying disturbances. It is driven hither and thither by the impulses of the fleshly nature. It is tossed up and down upon a sea of temptations. It is deceived, misled, betrayed, disappointed, until it cries

Scene from
domestic
life.

out, as did the poor Prodigal, for its Father. And that Father, "who seeth in secret," hears

the cry of the distressed child. He
How it is in
 the divine
 family. is near it, in the calm retirement

where it seeks refuge, inviting it, bewildered and helpless as it is, to come and rest itself by communing with him. There, in the closet, is its haven of peaceful waters. Have the archers shot at it, and is it sorely wounded? There is the balm of Gilead and the Physician. That child hungers for food which the world cannot give; and there it is, the bread of heaven, of which if a man eat he shall not hunger. It is the immortal spirit in him which thirsts; and there, in his closet, he finds the water of life, which is a well of water, in those who drink it, springing up into everlasting life. "Come, thou weary child, born of mine own Spirit," is the invitation; "come and refresh thee in thy Father's love. Enter into thy closet, and be alone with me in secret, till thou shalt learn how much readier than any earthly parent I am to give good things to my children."

After this manner does God speak of the hour of prayer. Thus do all the pure-hearted yearn for it, and welcome its coming. It is the cool arbor, fragrant and beautiful, out of which God calls to us daily, inviting us to turn aside from our flinty pathway, that we may be rested and refreshed in his presence.

This meeting with the Father in secret, in order to fulfil its blessed ministry, must be distinguished by three things: reading the

A threefold cord. Bible, self-scrutiny, prayer. These may be considered as three separate duties or exercises, but in our Christian life each of them will be found to involve the other two. No one can examine himself in the light of God, and not be constrained to pray, "Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me." Whoever reads the Bible understanding what he reads, finds that his own thoughts, brought to that perfect rule, are in the mean time accusing, or else excusing, one another. And while one prays, uttering the weakness and longings of which he is conscious, he finds no words but those of the Bible

adequate to his groanings. As a ship escapes from the storm into its quiet harbor by means of three things,—ballast to keep it low in the water, sails to catch the wind, and a helm to guide its course,—so the Christian returns into his rest in the closet by examining himself, reading the Bible, and praying to his Father. These three work together. It is the Bible, read with a docile mind, which holds him to his course; it is beholding himself in the light of God that keeps him low in his own thoughts; it is the life of the Father, breathed forth in answer to prayer, which bears him onward into his rest. Each of these exercises so involves the other two, that whoever is faithful in either of them

Reading
the Bible,
self-exami-
nation, and
prayer al-
ways go
hand in
hand.

will be faithful in them all; and if any man be negligent of either he will slight them all. As soon as we begin to examine ourselves, we look for the perfect standard by which to try our character and life; and as soon as we

know that standard, we begin to cry, "God be merciful to me a sinner." If you tell me that you never pray, then I know that you

are not an earnest student of the Bible and your own heart. If I could persuade you to attend to either of these duties as you should, I might be sure that you would soon be faithful to them all.

But do I not become a judge of my fellow-disciples, if it be they whom I would persuade to love the hour of prayer? If any are still waiting for arguments to draw them on to this blessed meeting with God, it can hardly be that they are his children. Can the new life be in them, and never leap upward after its source? It should startle us, and cause us to look sharply into the foundations of our hope in Christ, if we do not anticipate with pleasure the hours of communion with God. Should we esteem that an anchor to the soul which does not hold us lovingly to him who

The Christian life not possible without prayer.

is the Father of our spirits? Prayer is the earliest cry of the new-born child of God. The Christian life begins with it, and finds in it evermore the light of life. It is only as we are estranged from God, unconscious of his divine

nature dwelling in us, that meeting with him ceases to be our delight. The soul which never prays is dead. It begins to pray as soon as it begins to live. This is shown us in the case of St. Paul. The proof that he had been renewed by the divine Spirit was the fact that he prayed. The Lord said to his servant Ananias, "Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold he prayeth."

St. Paul.

Ananias need not be afraid of him any longer. He had been born into God's family: God had begotten him, through the Spirit, to be his dear child; and the voice of that sonship in him was a prayer, feebly lisped in the dawn of the truth that God was his Father, and to be spoken more articulately, and with a richer fullness, as he grew towards the stature of a man in Christ Jesus. His praying showed that he had ceased to be a persecutor of the Christians, that he now was of the number of those who fled from him to Damascus.

A prayerless Christian is an impossibility: it is as though a living man should not breathe, as though the sun should still be the sun while giving out neither heat nor light. To be a Christian is to partake of the life of Christ. But the life of Christ was a divine sonship in humanity. By virtue of this sonship he was in the Father, and the Father in him. This tender fellowship and indwelling was on the one side a constant prayer, and on the other side a constant hearing of that prayer. Therefore, if any pray not as Christ did, what can we say but that they have no part in him? Can you be God's child if you have no impulse to call on him as your Father? if, when you hear him say, "Seek my face," you do not answer, "Thy face, Lord, will I seek"? If you have been born of the free woman, how is it that you speak not the language of the free woman? Should not the children of Canaan use the speech of Canaan? Whoever has entered into the life of God will breathe the breath of that life, which is prayer.

The voice
of sonship.

We cannot understand, while looking only at the nature of the Christian life, how there should ever be occasion to complain of the prayerlessness of Christians. But in speaking to this point, great charity becomes us. He that thinketh he standeth, may be the first to fall. Even where the spirit is willing, the flesh is sometimes weak. There are Sloughs of Despond, no less than Delectable Mountains, in the life of prayer. Our infirmities may choke the flame of devotion even after that flame has burned clearly. The earthly nature in us struggles against the heavenly. Seasons of depression will come, in which we shall find it hard to pray; nor is there any escape for us, save as we are clothed upon with our house from heaven. It is our old life of sin, rising up in us, and striving to regain its lost dominion, which causes us to grow weary of prayer. The new life, though burning low and almost quenched, still yearns, with such strength as it has, for the mercy-seat. It welcomes the divine visits with the whole power of its feeble voice.

Why we
grow weary
of prayer.

The new man in Christ Jesus, finding the impulse to pray weakened and sorely burdened in him, can exclaim, "It is no more I, but sin that dwelleth in me." He, renewed after the image of God, still prays; and the measure of his life in Christ is the delight he finds in prayer. The bruised reed is not broken. The smothered flame burns on. So far as he is a Christian, conscious of the divine life dwelling in him, he loves his hours of communion with God: he anticipates them, he welcomes them, he enters with joy into their holy duties. That joy may be faint at the outset, but it becomes full, and he triumphs over his infirmities, as he opens his soul more and more. He finds a blessed refreshment in being alone with God; and this refreshment is great according to the greatness of the life of Christ in him.

A test of
the new
life.

That the hour of prayer is ever joyfully welcomed by the true children of God was wonderfully manifest in the experience of our blessed Lord. He seemed almost to have no other hour; prayed so much in spirit, and

entered so fully into the mind of the Father as to carry the atmosphere of the closet about

with him wherever he went. Though appearing outwardly to men in temporal form and vesture, he yet in-

A constant
joy to
Christ.

habited eternity; he dwelt in the bosom of the Father. This spiritual indwelling was that which most filled his consciousness, so that even in the midst of earthly disturbances he could be alone with God. We read of him as absorbed in works of love, yet, even while doing those works, rejoicing in spirit, and saying, "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth;" saying these words in such a way as to show that the eternal, more than the

temporal, was present to his thoughts — wholly and divinely blessed in know-

He dwelt
in eternity.

ing that he was in the Father and the Father in him. At the grave of Lazarus also, while affected to tears by the grief of Mary and Martha, and while the company of Jews present were angrily watching him, this whole earthly scene was in a moment shut out from his mind.

He was alone with God, in the sanctuary of

the soul; and he lifted up his eyes, not to a distant power, but to an infolding presence, saying, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me, and I know that thou hearest me always." He spoke these words in the secrecy of his divine Sonship, and his prayer was answered openly in the coming forth of his friend from the grave. In like manner, when he prayed for his disciples at the Last Supper, all his words came out of eternity — words which we can fathom only as we partake of the life eternal in him. Nothing earthly or temporal entered into the holy of holies where he prayed the Father for us. He was conscious of being in the high sphere and region of his own divinity, a beloved Son communing with the infinite Father, praying for those whom he loved out of that Father's bosom.

Yet even Christ, though always praying in spirit, was not content without special hours, in which he went away by himself to meet the Father. When we read of him that "he was alone praying," we feel that something habitual in his

Yet Christ
loved the
hour of
prayer.

life is indicated. His whole career on earth seems to be summed up in that striking sentence which says, "In the daytime he was teaching in the temple, and at night he went out and abode in the mount that is called the Mount of Olives." When he came to his disciples in the fourth watch of the night, walking to their drowning ship on the stormy sea, he had just left the dear spot where he was wont to be refreshed in spirit. "It came to pass in those days," says St. Luke, "that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God." After his baptism, having been sealed to his solemn office by the coming of the Spirit upon him, he went away into the wilderness, and was there

In the wilderness. forty days alone with the beasts of the earth. No doubt that solitude was full of heavenly sweetness to him. He was so long in an ecstasy of devotion that his mortal powers gave out. But the blessed hours of prayer made him fresh in soul to meet the tempter, to hold fast his faith that he was the Son of God. Communion with

God strengthened him to undertake for lost men, who, as he foresaw, would lay on him the burden of their wrath and scorn, and madly nail him to the cross. As he sought the sweet influence of prayer in beginning his ministry, so was it a refuge to him when that ministry drew to its tragic close. When he saw the cross ready, waiting for him to be lifted up upon it, he went over the brook into a place where was a garden; and there, curtained by the night and the shadows of the olive trees, he girded himself for the sacrifice. "Being in an agony, he prayed."

Gethse-
mane.

And then he came to his disciples, and found them sleeping, whereupon he went away again and prayed; and then again the third time, in the very same words. Thus did he overcome the wild fear which had seized hold of him. His darkness was turned to light, his anguish to peace. He could take the cup, which might not pass from him, with a firm hand; could submit himself, in a solemn calm, to the judgment of the Father against sin, saying, "Thy will, not mine, be done."

It is true that Christ, who found so much comfort and joy in the hour of prayer, felt none of those inward hinderances which often trouble us. He was the holy Son of God, without sin or sinful taint, dwelling in the bosom of the Father. The sources of his spiritual life were always open. He was not averse to the set time of meeting with God, but looked forward eagerly to it. But we are naturally strangers to God, conscious of being his children only as we are born again, the new life feeble in us at the best. From this it follows that our joy in prayer cannot be the unmixed and infinite joy of Christ. Yet it is of the same nature as his—a real entering into the life of God, though neither so pure nor so great. The fact that our joy is less than his, shows that we have the more need; it is by our praying that we shall make the flesh weaker and the spirit stronger in us; thus rising to the measure of his stature until our joy is full. Did he need that strengthening which comes by abiding in the Father?

Why
Christ's
love of
prayer ex-
ceeded
ours.

then we should not dare trust ourselves a moment without it. He is not ashamed to call us his brethren; yet how little of his consciousness of sonship we have in us! That consciousness was so vivid in him as to enable him, amid the greatest outward confusion, to pray and rejoice in spirit. But we, even in the stillness of the closet, must struggle to call God *Father*. O, then, if we would have such brotherliness as was in Christ, and call God our Father with his full and rejoicing voice, so as to find our sweetest solace in the hour of prayer, let us be continually entering into our closet, and praying to Him who seeth in secret. Thus alone can our troubled spirits be at rest, and the divine joy, which has begun to warm them, make them radiant in all their depths.

But we have other witness to the preciousness of the hour of prayer. In all ages the servants of God, to the degree that they have had the spirit of the Son, have delighted in the holy duties of the closet. Enoch walked with God: and this life of prayer, which he

The less
our joy, the
greater our
need.

lived in a wicked age, lifted him out of the common lot till he was translated. Living, and believing, he never died. He saw not the face of the king of terrors. He laid aside the earthly house without a pang or fear. It caused no wrench in his feelings, but sent a thrill of pleasure through them, to be called away into the more open vision. Abraham had so much of this spirit, and communed with God so often in secret places, that he was called "the friend of God." Jacob was named Israel because he wrestled in prayer till he prevailed. When Moses came down out of the mount, his face shone with the joy of meeting God, so that the people were afraid to look on him. That shining, so dreadful to consciences defiled by idolatry, was the glow of a soul overflowing with life. Companionship with God had made the spirit of Moses full of light; he felt the strength and peace of a divine indwelling. In like manner were all the prophets of Israel clothed upon. God feasted them in spirit while they prayed before him. By this means

Various instances of love for the hour of prayer.

came their inspiration; this was the live coal, from off the altar, which touched their lips. Take out of the record of those holy men of old the accounts we have of their secret prayers and longings unto God, and the charm of that record would be gone. The little remnant of outward fact would be dull and stale. We can no more think of those men without tracing their wondrous works and words to the blessed fountain of prayer, than we can think of a river as possible without a source, or of the light of day as shining without a sun.

Whom did God make ruler over his people, and cause the kings of the earth to fear? It was the youngest of the sons of Jesse, one who from childhood delighted to be alone with God. This divine yearning made him a man

David remarkable for this.

after God's own heart, notwithstanding his great wickedness. Though he was full of evil impulses, yet he loved to feel that God was near him. His sweet Psalms, which have been the comfort of so many burdened hearts, are but the voice of his own

heart praying in secret. He called upon the Lord in the morning, at evening, and during the night-watches. The bird that had her nest in the wall of the house of prayer, seemed to him to be blessed. His heart panted after God. He was continually saying, "When shall I come, and appear before God?" "The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended," we read in the seventy-second Psalm. That Psalm may be the last of his recorded prayers, but we cannot think that he ceased praying while on earth, or that he now fails to do so in heaven. The true Christian never bids farewell to his sweet hour of prayer. His closet, which is so dear to him here below, is but the type of a nearer and sweeter communion on high.

Now and always, prayer is the voice of the child longing unto its Father; conscious of a divine life coming into it, even as the branch lives by abiding in the vine. There is nothing which men desire more than the consciousness of power. Hence their haste to be rich, their liking to be in places of authority, their

eagerness to make themselves a great name. But no such consciousness of power comes by these means, as the Christian feels while joying in God. In the divine might which comes to him through prayer, he is strong either to suffer or to do. Nothing is too hard for him. He can subdue his evil nature, can overcome the world; he beareth all things, hopeth all things, believeth all things, endureth all things. This blessed inworking is that secret of the Lord which is with them that fear him. Great peace have they with whom this secret abides. Here, no doubt, is laid open to us the source of what is greatest, purest, and best in men. Out of this dwelling in God as a dear child came the Confessions of Augustine, the Sermons of Massillon, the Thoughts of Pascal, the sustained fervor of Whitefield. The singing men and women, whose hymns make melody in our churches all round the world, have caught their inspiration in that secret fellowship with God into which prayer is the appointed way. We understand the patriotism

Prayer
gives the
conscious-
ness of
power.

of Washington, the missionary zeal of Brainerd, the courage of Luther, and the patience of the great company of whom the world was not worthy, by knowing that they loved the hour of prayer. They went often into its secret places, where the spirit of dear children in them uttered itself; and they felt there the life of the Father raising them up to newness of life, clothing their spirits with the bright garment of joy, witnessing that they had been born of God.

These rejoicing souls have never felt any hinderance in coming to God, as though their entreaties implied a doubt of his readiness to bless, or as though they were putting a private wish in the way of changeless decrees. If God were a law of nature, a cosmic force, or a fate, we might feel an impropriety in prayer. But he is our Father, and he is ready to do for us above all that we are able to ask, or even to think. When we are brought into perfect accord with him by the exercise of prayer, we grasp the truth of this exceeding readiness in him, and in our knowing of God as

the unwithholding Father, is that eternal life which meets our want, so that we need no other answer. "Do you," says an eminent writer, "pray as a child of God, whose first and nearest relationship is to God, your Father? whose most deeply-felt interests are bound up in that relation, in what lies within the circle of that relation contemplated in itself? Do you pray as one to whom the mind of God towards you and your mind towards him are the most important elements of existence, and whose other interests in existence are outer circles around this central interest; so that you see yourself, and your family, and your friends, and your country, and your race, with the eyes, because with the heart of one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and mind, and soul, and strength? Is this, at least, your ideal for yourself; what you are seeking to realize,—to realize for its own sake, not for the sake of any consequences of it in time or eternity? Then, whatever the blessed consequences of its realization will be, they shall

The joy of
prayer its
best an-
swer.

be far and forever inferior and secondary to itself."

Is the hour of prayer distasteful to you? Do you not, as God's child, daily experience your weakness, so as to be driven to him for help? Consider if this blessed duty has not been put in such a light that you should never again neglect it, but, on the contrary,

Why dis-
liked by
some.

esteem it the one pleasure of your life, with which you allow no stress of worldly cares to interfere? If you find in your closet no upliftings of soul, no enlargement of your joy and strength, it must be for the reason that you know not how weak you are. Your new life in Christ is not in conflict with the forces of evil, with which no human power is able to cope, so as to teach you how sorely you need the strength of God.

How to
correct this
feeling.

It is when you find this battle against sin too hard for you, that you will love to take refuge in prayer. O blessed danger, which makes us fly to our Fortress, where we find the peace that passeth understanding! If you, compassed about by infirmi-

ties, are daily striving to live the life of the holy Son of God, then are you in a conflict to which your human power is sadly unequal; forced to say, continually, "Father, save me from this hour," — save me from the hour and power of darkness by the influence of the hour of prayer. He who is not every day forced thus to cry out for help cannot be struggling to put down all his evil thoughts, to overcome the world, to convert sinners to God, to bear about the dying and the life of Christ in his mortal body. The new-born sons of God are all the time finding themselves weak, powerless to be in perfect accord with the mind and will of the Father. Billows go over their head, and they are ready to perish. Not drifting along in the currents of worldliness, but following their great purpose to be conformed to God, they have such experience of weakness as to be ever crying, "Abba, Father, keep us, calm us, lead us, give us the victory over foes too mighty for our strength?" In proportion to the sharpness of this conflict is

Our love of
prayer the
measure of
our faith-
fulness.

the love of the Christian for his devotional hours. He can never cease to love, and long for, the sweet time in which his prayer for help is answered. It is in his closet, visited with the outgoings of the morning and evening, that he is conscious of deliverance. There it is that peace, and joy, and glorious strength come into his soul. He turns to the hour of prayer as imprisoned plants turn to the sun. It is not irksome to him, but full of benedictions. The bitterest trial of his life would be, not to be allowed to pray; for it is in praying that he meets the God of all comfort, and receives a thousandfold for his daily conflicts and troubles.



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